Needs and Wants

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/52888288.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford/Will Graham
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford, Alana Bloom, Beverly Katz, Abigail Hobbs, Freddie Lounds, Brian Zeller, Jimmy Price, Bedelia Du Maurier, Franklyn Froideveaux
Additional Tags:	A/B/O, Omegaverse, Autistic Will Graham, Bonding, Mating, Hannibal Lecter Loves Will Graham, Will Graham Loves Hannibal Lecter, Slow Burn, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Canon-Typical Violence, Murder Husbands, Will's POV, Hannibal is Hannibal, Will Graham is So Done, Someone take care of WIll Graham, Hannibal Will - Freeform, Dominance and Submission, Mentally Ill Will, PTSD, Manipilation, heat - Freeform, Sugar Daddy Hannibal Lecter, will just wants to be loved, Biting, Blood, Anal Sex, Rough Oral Sex, Rough Sex, Power Dynamics, Power Play, Marking, Bottom Will Graham, Top Hannibal Lecter, Power Bottom Will Graham, Topping from the Bottom, Jack is dead, Will and Jack were married, Widow Will Graham, Will had a good dad, Omega Will Graham, Alpha Hannibal Lecter, Sexism, anti-choice legislation, Anti-birth control legislation, 60s like sexism against omegas and women, Hurt/Comfort, soft dom Hannibal lector, Protective Hannibal Lecter, Possessive Hannibal Lecter, Possessive Will Graham, Obedience, Obsession, time jumps, Two timelines, Hannibal's chapters are in the past, Will's Chapters are in the present
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2024-01-07 Updated: 2024-02-18 Words: 58,811 Chapters: 16/?

Needs and Wants

by fungi_n_fauna

Summary

Will worked so hard to get to where he was. An omega in the BAU? Unheard of. But everything fell apart. Between the encephalitis, Jack's murder and being kicked out of the investigation team "for his own good", Will is just...so fucking tired. He's haunted by the ghosts of his past and the line between his imagination and reality is permanently blurred. Ever determined, he's prepared to start over again and fight his way back. He's had to fight for everything so why stop now?

Life and Hannibal have other plans though and maybe, just maybe, it's not so bad.

Notes

Hi, y'all! Thanks for checking out this fic.

This is the first work I am posting publicly, so I'm very excited to see how it goes.
I wanted to give some heads up before diving in. I am dyslexic. So if you notice any mistakes please let me know! I'll appreciate it and fix them. I do my best to edit several times to catch them all, but this is the brain I've got to work with. The dyslexia and the fact that this is a long fic and I'm a slow-burn kinda writer means that I write slow. Annoying I know, but I'm determined to get this story out of my head, you'll just need to be patient with me if you end up liking this story.

I would love to hear any and all feedback. So feel free to let me know exactly what you think!
Also if I missed any tags you think should be added, let me know. Thanks!
Hope you enjoy it

Hannibal

Hannibal

It was only ten past seven. Hannibal misted the sprawling centerpiece on the dining table. The ornamental eucalyptus and purple flash pepper plants wouldl glisten with dew during dinner. The dusty blue-green hue of the eucalyptus leaves and the bright violet of the peppers stood out starkly against the darkness of the pepper's leaves and the tablecloth beneath. They were an almost identical shade of smoke-blackened purple. Hannibal shifted a few stems of eucalyptus to better blend in with the dark leaves. There were going to be no serving dishes tonight. Hannibal was plating everything himself. So, the centerpiece he created stretched low, from end to end of his long eight-seat dining table. Nothing to obstruct anyone's view during their meal.

Normally Hannibal avoided dinners for four. If he took his preferred seat at the head of the table, it would leave one person set oddly at the far end with only the person directly next to them to easily converse with. Or, almost as unfitting for this dinner, too spaced out with one person on each side of the large table. With careful consideration, while selecting his guests, it could be remedied. Yet, tonight needed four and no more. It also needed to be intimate and very carefully balanced. For this reason, he relinquished his place at the head of the table and removed four chairs. Only the four chairs needed were left, tucked comfortably at the center of the length of the table.

This dinner was to celebrate Jack's marriage. Hannibal supposes he would have made the guest list if there had been a wedding. However, from what he had gathered, Jack's spouse, Will, was in no way keen on the idea. They opted for the courthouse and little fuss. Jack had confessed it was no easy thing for him to convince Will to attend Hannibal's dinner tonight even. Few people turned down the opportunity to dine at Hannibal's table. He would have been offended if he weren't so intrigued. Jack confided in him about his omegan partner. Will is anti-social, intelligent, and autistic, with a rare and extreme sense of empathy. A talent Jack had found to be an unparalleled tool while hunting his serial killers.

Apparently, the only psychiatrist Will would voluntarily go anywhere near is Alana Bloom. She was the closest thing to a friend Jack thought Will had. A fortunate mutual connection Hannibal used to make this dinner more appealing to Will and ease Jack's way in convincing him to attend.

As much as he intended to put Will at ease by making himself the only new face tonight, he was not so willing to put Will's comfort above his own interest.

There was no need for place cards with a dinner so small. However, as a means to dictate the seating arrangement, he had placed Jack and Will's wedding gifts in front of their dinner wear nestled in the leaves of the centerpiece. Two small boxes wrapped in matt black paper. Each with a violet ribbon and their names artfully scribed in gold ink. Will would be sitting directly across from Hannibal himself.

Will

Will

The movers are finally packing up the last of their moving blankets and floor protectors. I had already folded the ones from the finished rooms and piled them by the front door to hurry things up. It's not like they were letting me do anything else. I hover on my front porch as the sweaty men dump the supplies in the back of their white truck. My eyes are fixed on a section of railing where the wax weatherproofing has worn thin. My thumb worrying over the patch. I'll have to refinish the porch then, check for any rot. The floorboards creak as the men pass back and forth. One loaded with so many blankets he has to crane his neck to see over his burden.

"Pass some over, man." One of the movers offers

"I got it," Blanket man gruffs out. There's a loud thudding step. "Shit!" He stifles the curse, but his coworkers see him miss the first porch step and laughs.

"Let someone bigger than ya carry such a load, buddy" One of them teases.

Ugh, alphas... I turn my back on them fully, holding back any reaction. I look out over the porch railing. In my mind, I'm walking through the once familiar woods not even a hundred yards away. The men too far to hear. Just the sounds of the afternoon forest fills my head.

"Sir?" The hesitant brassy voice is close. Too close and the convulsive tightening of my muscles and tension in my jaw is automatic. I wasn't present enough to hear him approach or likely his first few attempts to get my attention.

Deep breath in as I grasp for the tranquility of the forest that's slipping away. I turn, picking to observe the tarnished hardware of the man's overalls. "All done? I'll be right back." I don't wait for a response as I move past him, sticking as close to the wall as possible. His eyes watch me, and I hear when he takes a deeper breath in. Why can't they ever keep their noses to themselves?

-

When they first arrived, it was fine. I kept my distance. Even managed to bring in a few boxes for the room upstairs while they were busy hauling the mattress inside. I was coming back down when the man with blond hair, Evan according to his name tag, was coming up. It was inevitable then. His sharp intake of breath, pupils dilating, his searching gaze over me. Evan, this alpha, figured out in that moment that I am Omegan.

I locked my gaze to the stairs, hurried down, and went outside. He'd tell the other two.

The truck was alone, so I pulled out another box and started back to the house. Determined. I was going to drop the boxes on the porch for them to pick up. Keep some distance between me and the 3 alpha men. I got to stack two whole boxes before the tallest of the 3, Felix, spotted me and hurried over.

“Please, we’ll take care of it, honey.” He reaches for the box in my arms. The way his hands brushed over mine was no accident either, judging by the sly smile I’m sure he thought was charming.

I dropped the box of books, letting him take its full weight before he got a good enough grip. He grunted and I let the satisfaction make my smile genuine. “Thank you” Then walked away. Prick.

-

I walk back into the house to my bag hanging on a hook by the door and pull out 3 envelopes with 50 dollars in each. Only 4 hours and it feels like their presence is lingering in the wallpaper and woodgrain of my father’s old house. His home. Our home. They need to leave.

“Thank you for today,” I say, half leaning, half using the screen door as a barrier. I don’t really look at any of them. There’s no gracious way of tipping. It’s awkward on both sides of the whole transaction. I can feel it radiating off them. I, at least, prefer awkward to their earlier testosterone induced peacocking.

I carefully not watch as Levi, a shortish man with freckled skin, looks anywhere but the envelopes. The other two are shifting. Felix leans against the pillar by the stairs trying to look relaxed, but keeps shifting his weight from foot to foot. I thrust the envelopes to Evan in the middle. “Here.” They can pass them out among themselves.

“Thank you, Sir. Have a good evening.” He throws over his shoulder and passes their enclosed tips off to the others.

I let the screen door shut after a curt, “Yeah, you too.” And walk away.

As soon as I hear them shut their truck doors and start the engine, I let a shiver roll up my spine and listen as the crunch of the truck on the gravel drive fade into the distance. When it's gone, the silence of the house settles like dust around me, heavy and unnatural.

I expected the eerie quiet. I expected the ache in my chest. I expected the house to feel empty and cold. Just like it did after my dad passed. Jack following behind me with his soft voice and guiding touches. I moved where he pointed me, numb with grief and mechanical in the need to complete all the tasks that were ahead of me. I just wanted to get out then. The place, a carcass. Once full of life, then without its soul.

The first two were there. It is quiet like something is blocking out the natural sounds of the wind and forest just outside. The pressure of it builds in my ears.

The ache in my chest feels like my heart is filling like a water balloon, on the verge of bursting open, standing here in my dad's home. More like my father than ever, now a widow myself.

I think it's that fact that chases away the cold emptiness of his loss. The water in my chest fills the house. Full to the brim, spilling over with memories, warm and bright that do nothing to ease the pain settling into my bones. I just stand in the middle of the living room. Looking. Looking at everything that was. Looking at the home I have not seen in 6 years.

Slowly the pressure ebbs. The sound of the cicadas' cries seeps back into the house. It's not right. This place pales now compared to the warm glow of the overlaying memories living within these walls. My eyes burn. I've got to turn this place back into the home it once was. I move.

-

Late afternoon settles into deep night. My stomach cramps. That finally breaks me out of my hyper-focus.

My phone says it's three, forty-six AM. I managed to sweep and clean all the floors and surfaces free of the dust that has gathered over the years. I moved all the furniture around to where I want it. The bed is set back up in what architecturally is supposed to be the dining area of the living room. Where it was when I used to live here. Dad's bedroom upstairs is acting as storage. The kitchen is also all clean and all my dishes and small appliances are unpacked and set up. I want this house to be livable before going to sleep.

There is half a box of linen left on the floor beside me. The closet under the stairs already holds my unneeded towels and blankets. All that's left is the bedding. The crumpled fitted sheets, a chaotic barrier to the neatly folded top sheets and pillowcases underneath. I pluck one up and with a big shake, it balloons out and half settles on the floor. I can fold a fitted sheet; dad taught me. I just don't see the point. It, however, feels wrong to shove them into their new home. One corner tucks into the other. Shake it out...and my stomach twists and gurgles once again. My shaky hands let the sheet drop to the floor.

I was supposed to go grocery shopping after the movers left. However, before I could check out of the hotel this morning, Hannibal was sitting in the lobby's lounge area. Tan and mint plaid suit making him blend in oddly with the pale camel leather sofa chair he was reading in. As much as he blended in visually, there was never a chance of missing him. He drew attention in any room. Always the odd one out, though always seemingly perfectly comfortable. I may be slightly envious.

He came with food, neatly packed in a small cooler. I don't truly understand Hannibal's motives when he does things like this. I feel like I should be more uncomfortable with that, but I am too grateful for it at this moment as I pull out a glass tupperware of some kind of stew. Even cold, the rich scents of garlic, red wine and beef makes me groan. I know Hannibal would die a little inside knowing I'm reheating it in the microwave, but this moment calls for speed the stove top just can't offer.

I grab a fork from the freshly tidied drawer and sit at the old kitchen table and eat right out of the tupperware. The moment the first bite hits my tongue, I'm scarfing the food down like one of my dogs at every meal. There's really no other way to describe it. Hannibal would be appalled.

The hunger abated and the dish washed and put back in the borrowed cooler, I open the window above the sink to let the warm night air in. The sound of crickets and the nighttime forest brings back nights when my dad would grab us both a beer from the fridge. Dad would cook while I worked at the kitchen table. I look over at the rough worn square table, seeing it scattered with books, papers and my old chunky laptop. I sit back in the chair that was always mine and let the memory play out. Dad would have the radio on low, his dry tenor voice humming along to whatever played. He wasn't picky, but he'd really get singing if Abba came on. Most times I'd join in too.

My eyes close as I softly hum along to the memory of old Tom Graham singing Honey, Honey by Abba into a suds covered wooden spoon at the sink. Here and now just the crickets back the ghost of his voice instead of the radio.

The song ends and the radio host introduces the next song in a blur of unremembered murmurs. I look to the sink and see Dad turn around to me with surprisingly misty eyes, "Y'know, your mom would sing this song to me all the time. She even did it on our wedding day. 'Front of everyone." He would get this distant look wherever he'd get caught up in a memory of his lost mate. "She was such a goof." he whispers. Dad was generous with his memories of my mother. He always said just because I was too little to remember her when she died, doesn't mean I shouldn't know her.

My mother always felt like a ghost following dad around. Losing her had broken him. Left him fragile even though he tried never to show that to me. I could always see it, feel his pain deep in my own bones. But dad kept her alive for both of us, as much as he could. Now they both haunt me. The vision of my father passes. I'm left looking through the screen of the window out to the forest. A deeper black against the dark night sky. Out this far the stars and moon seem almost too bright.

The bittersweet tang of his grief tastes the air and mixes with my own many griefs. My own grief at Jack's death feels like a pale comparison to my father's. We weren't anything like my parents. They were mated for one. Something so rare, it's basically treated like a fairy tale. From how dad talked about it, it kind of sounded like one too.

Another memory comes, unbidden.

"Son, I know it ain't any of my business, but I gotta ask. Do you feel it? Do you feel something special with Jack?" Dad is now sitting across from me. The textbooks and laptop gone from the table. Instead, there are two coffee mugs, half drunk and long gone cold. This was the day I told my dad I was getting married. I fidget with the mug, watching the ripples forming in the dark liquid.

"Dad... You and mom. You were lucky. And anyways, I kinda doubt I'm built for a connection like yours. You know how I am." I throw out half smile with the end.

“Nonsense.” He brushes off my self-assessment, “It doesn’t have to be a bond, kid. I know I was lucky. I’m asking if you love him. Getting married, that’s... big.” His hand stretches out but pauses at the center of the table and waits.

“It’s...a good step. For both of us. And yes, I love him in a sense. I know that’s not what you want to hear. But he’s a good man, dad. He’s attentive and supportive. He doesn’t expect or want a good little omega at home for him. He wants me out there. With him in the field. You know how hard I’ve worked. He’s offering me a way in. Permanently.”

“I know. It ain’t right how they’ve been keeping you out. You’re brighter than the lot of them and they just can’t see past someone’s gender, especially if they are different.” By different he means me being autistic and that thing I can do...

“Jack doesn’t see me like that. And I don’t need a mate or even a typical romantic partner. It’s just never felt like a need for me. He doesn’t want someone like that either. Not after Bella died.” I can see dad softening at the reminder that like him, Jack lost his mate.

“I get it. I’m happy for you.” He smiles at me. The pain shows through, but so does his pride.

“Thanks dad.” I can see him slipping into memories of my mother. His eyes going distant and fond. I reach to take his waiting hand. “What’s being bonded like?”

He focuses back on me, that smile growing sweet as honey. “It’s subtle at first. You’d never notice it. They are just someone who seems...good to be around. Nothing big. Nothing showy. None of that love at first sight crap like in the movies.” He huffs, “But you’re drawn to them. Consciously and unconsciously, you find ways to be around each other. It seems so totally normal, like you just got lucky and are making a real good friend. Until you’ve gotten close enough, then suddenly there is no one else in the world for you. Ever.”

Dad fades again but his presence lingers. A comfort I can wrap around me now like one of my many blankets. I never realized just how much I missed him.

-

Dad’s voice wakes me. What he said though escapes me in consciousness. My dreams were filled with boatyards, new school halls, strange faces that never lasted. The common thread being dad at my back. Throwing me to the world the way he threw himself.

I scrub at my face. My facial hair is crossing the boundary from neat scruff to full beard. I need coffee. The blankets are a rumpled mess and I’m tangled in it. I kick them off and free myself. After a stop in the bathroom, I pad over to the kitchen, still a bit zombie like despite the cold water used to wash up with.

The coffee feels like it takes years to make. Dripping one drop per infinity as I zone out watching it fill. Drop by slow drop. I should eat, but there's no appetite in me yet. Maybe after coffee. The echos of my dreams swirl in my head as they fade into unintelligible snippets.

I pull out the pot the moment there's enough coffee for a mug. The machine continues to drip as I quickly fill my cup and shove the pot back in. A deep sigh releases from me as I drop into my place at the kitchen table and take a sip. It’s a little too hot. The bitter liquid scalds my tongue and the roof of my mouth, but I don’t care. It's not that bad. The heat spreads through me. Radiating out from my chest to the rest of me and I slump further into the wooden chair.

The cicadas are screaming outside already, their cacophonous choir, a lulling sound through the closed-up house. Barely audible. I open the window above the kitchen table to let the sound travel in with the air. The sound of gravel crunching down the distance becomes apparent.

Alana.

The dogs!

I’m up and out to the front porch, bare feet descending and stepping uncomfortably onto the gravel drive as Alana pulls up. As soon as the car turns a bit, and the rear window gets a glimpse of me an eruption of barking comes from the back seats and trunk space behind them. Oh, fuck her seats... The dogs are going wild, and Alana rushes out to open all the doors.

The four dogs pour out. I crouch for them. Arms wide and I brace for the impact. And impact there is. All at once I’m in an excided onslaught of dog tongues and noses in every which place. Hands scratching behind what feels like a million ears and chins. Excited yips and whines coming from all angles. I normally don’t let them get this rowdy, but I missed them too.

So much.

“Ok ok, down. Down!” I can’t put any force behind it through the laughing. The cuddle fest continues

“They missed you a lot.” Alana says. Between all the dogs in my face I can’t see her. Only flashes of deep cobalt blue, icy skin and dark hair as she stands by the car watching us.

“I can tell.” I say to her “Ok enough now. Down” this time they listen and start to back off enough to let me stand. They still mill around me. Rubbing against my legs and each other like cats. “Thank you for taking care of them for so long. Four dogs are a handful.” I say as I dust myself off. Only making eye contact with Alana at the end. She holds my gaze in hers. Pleasant and easy. She’s so beautiful.

She moves her glossy dark brown hair off her shoulder. Not a hair flip. More deliberate and utilitarian as Baxter trots over to her for cuddles. She leans down a little to scritch him behind the ear.

“It was my pleasure. They are hardly a handful with how well you have them trained.” She stays standing by her car. Something cautious in her stance.

The feeling of fur on my bare legs makes me catch up with the fact that I'm standing here in nothing but my boxers and sleepshirt. "Uh, I feel compelled to go cover myself. I just made some coffee. Would you like some?"

She let out an amused laugh and finally moves closer. "I have brothers." she waves me off.

"I'll put on a house gown all the same. Coffee then?" I head to the door, dogs following along getting underfoot.

"Coffee sounds good." I hear her climbing the short steps up to the porch behind me.

The dogs pour into the house and start their sniffing exploration. I leave her downstairs as I go up to the bathroom. I snatch the house gown that's hanging on the back of the bathroom door. The soft fabric glides over my arms, forest green cotton lined with brown terrycloth. The comfort of the robe settles me as I dash downstairs.

I pass Alana in the central hallway that serves as an office. "Milk, right?" I throw over my shoulder as she politely looks around.

"Yes please." She steps into the kitchen after me. "You seem pretty well settled already."

I reach for a rust-colored mug and fill it, splashing in some milk. "Most of this was already here." I pass her the mug and retrieve mine from the kitchen table. "I didn't take much from Jack's place."

"It's homey." She says. Careful. Then she takes a sip from her steaming mug. "Thanks." she makes a toasting gesture with her mug.

I watch Max, the tricolor border collie, sit on her feet and she huffs a laugh. Hand reaching down to pet his head. "They really like you." I say. There's a fondness that fills me along with the gratitude I have knowing the dogs were happy while away from me.

"I'm afraid I may have spoiled them. I didn't have the heart to keep to the no dogs on the sofas and bed rule you and Jack held." She looks sheepishly up at me. Head canted down, cool blue eyes peering at me through lashes. She's not flirting. She's trying to see if this is opening enough to talk about Jack, without outright asking.

I swallow and avert my gaze. I can't help the small smile spreading across my face. She's too cute. From most people, I'd find the gentile prodding annoying, but not her. "I plan on spoiling them too. Those were Jack's rules, not mine. Plus, these sofas aren't three-thousand dollars." I watch as the other dogs pile onto the rug back in the hall. Their addition to the house immediately turned this place back into the home I was so desperately trying to unpack into existence. It's so good to have them back. No more 'dogs live outside' and 'furniture is for humans'. This is their home as much as mine.

Because I am in such good spirits, I decide to spare her whatever tactics she has planned to get me to talk. "Ask, Alana. It's OK."

Mug almost to her mouth, she laughs at being called out, sending the whisps of steam dancing in the air before her face. “I didn’t want to push.” she says, and I wave that off and wait. “I understand selling the house after... But you got rid of everything tied to Jack very quickly. I just want to know how you’re doing.” blunt but she says it with a gentleness that shows no judgment. Her eyes, curious and just as gentle as her tone. It was a mistake to look. The concern and openness in them mixed with talk of that house brings up more than I expected. Jack strung up in the living room.

Jack’s voice ghosts across the back of my neck, “You left me behind.” I swallow the lump of nausea in my throat.

“The rest was all Jack’s, from before we got married.” I feel the tension in my jaw as I press my lips into a thin line. “Wasn’t going to move into his other property. I have a home of my own.” I gesture to the comparatively humble little home around us. Alana’s face darkens. She never liked how Jack’s and my dynamics played out, but We knew what we were doing. So, before she can comment I continue, “plus this way Jack won’t haunt me for letting the dogs on the bed or how they scratch the hardwood floors of his fancy apartment.” He will just haunt me for abandoning him.

She doesn’t find my joke funny. Not many people do… She frowns, her expression sharp. I sigh. Psychiatrist mode, not just a friend anymore. “Are you still hallucinating?” She takes three quick steps towards me. Hand on my forehead before I can protest. All alphas tend to have personal space issues with omegas, even gay alpha women like Alana. She’s usually better at respecting how much I don’t like being touched though.

I know she’s just concerned, however. Can feel her worry, fizzing through the delicate pads of her fingers on my forehead and cheek as she compares the temperature. That lets me keep the tension from seizing my body at the sudden intrusion. I gently grab her wrists and pull her hands from my face. Shifting to hold her hand in both of mine for a moment, squeezing it reassuringly before letting go. “I’m not sick anymore. Don’t worry so much about me.”

She almost rolls her eyes. “Good luck making any of us stop worrying about you for a good long while. Do you know how hard it was to talk Beverly out of showing up with Price and Zeller to help you move? It was only the fact that Hannibal said he knew you arranged for movers that stopped her.” Hannibal had in fact arranged for the moving company all by himself. Without asking me might I add. Odd that he didn’t say so to Alana and Beverly.

“Great.” I say sounding more exasperated than I am. “So, you’re all meeting up to talk about me now.” I appreciate that despite the hell life had turned into this past year, or more, somehow along the way I’ve ended up with more people in my life than just Jack. I won't begrudge them their concern. I scared the shit out of all of them.

Alana is sharp as a tack though, and not easily distracted. “You didn’t answer the question.” She tips her head imploringly, “Are you still having hallucinations?”

I shouldn’t have joked about it if I truly wanted to keep it to myself, so I concede. “I’ve been hallucinating long before the encephalitis. It’s not the same though. I can tell the difference now.”

She doesn't look pleased, and I can see she's mulling something over. I'm suddenly tired and set my now empty mug in the sink. Putting my back to her. "Really, I'm ok. I'm not good. But I'm ok. It's better being here. Even better with the dogs." I look over my shoulder and flash her a smile. I know it's kind of weak, but whatever. "Thanks again for taking care of them."

-

I pass the pile of flattened empty boxes that have taken up residence on and around my workbench in the central hall, on my way to the kitchen. I need to recycle those.

I'm groggy from a fitful night's sleep. The nightmares are resurfacing. Less chaotic and real feeling than while my brain was on fire, but last night was filled with childhood memories merging with the image Jack's gapping chest, empty. The wendigo whispering "heartless" with every drip of blood coming from the stick sack against Jack's shoulder.

I try to shake off the lingering image and focus on breakfast. I set the coffee maker and open the fridge. That's when I notice I am nearly out of the food Hannibal provided. Between fixing up the house and settling the dogs into their new and much extended freedom, the days blurred together. I reach for one of the two containers left, a potato salad situation. The other is something that looks like squash or pumpkin soup.

I sigh. Tired already at the prospect of reentering the world after the peace and safety of the past four days cocooned away here. I eat the cold potato salad over the sink as I wait for the coffee to brew. My gratitude towards Hannibal grows as I think of facing the grocery store later. At least I can also get some stain for the kitchen cabinets while I'm out. There is still food for lunch so maybe I can go around three. I can take the dogs for a run and fix the wonky shelf in the kitchen before I go. Ok, that will do. Nothing big.

Mentally organized for the day, I wash Hannibal's container, put it away, and take my coffee upstairs to dress for the walk. I want to take the dogs deeper into the forest today.

-

The phone rings in my pocket. I am on my back. Head and shoulders inside the cabinet with the janky shelf looking up at the dark wood. A mini flashlight in my mouth pointing to the corner I am trying to work a screw into. The shelf sits on these little wood wedges that act as supports. One in the back corner broke off at some point and was nowhere to be found. So, I figure if I just put a screw, halfway in for the shelf to sit on, it should be just fine.

I let the phone ring as I awkwardly try to work the screw in. It doesn't let up, however. By the sixth ring, I give in. The screw is in far enough. It's a tight squeeze to get my arm back down and hand to my pocket and back. I don't even have room to look at the caller ID, so I just answer. "Yeah?"

"Good afternoon." It's Hannibal. The exasperation at being interrupted falls away.

"Hi. I was just thinking about you earlier." I cringe slightly. That sounded more intimate than I intended, though it is true. One of my favorite things about Hannibal is I don't have to filter

what I say around him half as much as with other people. He is able to take what I say without digging for implied meanings. Doesn't change the anxiety when I say something that might be marked as off unintentionally.

However, He doesn't disappoint. "I assume that is due to you running out of the food I prepared for you. The reason in fact for my calling." I don't know if many people could hear the amusement in his politely flat tone. It's there though and I find it contagious. I free my other hand by placing the screwdriver on my chest and rake my hand through my hair.

"You are at risk of knowing me too well, Dr. Lector." I can hear a soft huff of air on the other end of the call. "Thank you again. It was all delicious."

"I am glad. Would you like more?" There's an expectation there. I falter as I dig for what else is there in that statement. The screwdriver above my heart becomes heavy like it's made of lead. He may be good at taking me for face value, but I still falter to trust him the same way.

I must pause for too long or maybe he can just hear the gears frantically turning even over the phone. "It is a genuine offer, Will."

It's my turn to exhale a laugh, though in less good humor than his earlier one. "Yes please. Thank you. I've been rather absorbed in... well I guess nesting." the last part a more vulnerable admission than I'd give to most.

"Nesting is important to soothe anxiety and foster a relaxing environment. Does your house require much modification to suit your needs?" His tone, polite and curious.

"It needs some maintenance and updating. I've neglected it for over half a decade." Guilt sours my mouth a bit and I shift uncomfortably.

"For understandable reasons." He pauses for a moment then the rest makes me laugh outright. "Will, you sound like you are in a coffin. Where are you?" The change in topic is abrupt, but welcome. It also reminds me I'm having this conversation still half buried in a cabinet.

"Uh..." I start to wriggle out. "I was fixing a shelf in one of my kitchen cabinets when you called." I can't help the soft grunt as the lip of the baseboard digs into my shoulder blades, but I'm almost out.

"Are you doing all the repairs your...self?" He sounds mildly baffled by the notion. Boujee bastard.

I escape my coffin and start off tartly "Hannibal..." my voice comes out almost a purr. "Do you object to such lowly labor itself or the idea of little ol' omegan me doing such activities?" It's an unfair dig, but I can't help it. He's never once shown me he holds sexist ideas of omegas and women needing to be relocated to gentile tasks. But he is a snob, as much as he's polite about it. I can't help poking at him sometimes.

I can feel him thinking in the pause after my words. "I am just always in admiration of how capable you are." He's good.

“Good answer.” I say, knowing he can hear the grin in my voice. “Since I am capable, I am doing it myself. It's nothing huge anyway and it's not like I’m going to be busy anymore.” That cools my good humor. The bitterness of being kicked off the investigation team after, well after everything, seeps into the last part, “It wasn’t teaching that was flying me all round the country.”

“Or making you unwell.” he replies coolly.

I’m abruptly angry, but not at Hannibal. “You and I both know that concern for my well-being is not the reason I’ve been booted out of the BAU. Jack was the only reason I was able to consult in the first place and with him...gone... and what happened after...” I get up off the floor, needing to pace. It’s not just anger roiling in me. “I had no chance.” I sigh and rub my face with my free hand. Phone tightly pressed against my ear by the other. I can hear Hannibal breathing on the other end for a moment before he replies.

Words carefully chosen, but not quite like in our sessions. We haven’t had an official unofficial session since I was hospitalized. “The evident sexism in the way they are treating you is reprehensible. As your friend, however, I must admit I am relieved you are away from such a source of mental distress and physical strain. Do you really wish to return, or do you just resent the reasons you cannot return?”

He always has such a way of cutting to the heart of things. “I was saving people.” It’s a feeble protest and not an answer.

Hannibal just waits. I want to growl at him but that wouldn’t be fair. “I don’t know how to feel useful without it. It was everything I worked so hard for... How many omegas get to where I got?” I’m ranting, but I can’t stop. “And we can’t deny the stats of when I’m on the investigation versus when I’m not. I don’t know how to walk away from looking when I know I can make a difference.” The guilt swirls deep in my stomach.

“You aren’t walking away. You are being denied access.” He’s so matter of fact it hurts.

I grimace. “Doesn’t make it any easier. It’s likely worse.” I’m so quiet I am surprised he hears me.

My pacing has taken me out the kitchen, through the hall and into the living room. All the dogs are napping on the dog beds I had spread around between the sofa and fireplace. I stand by my bed and watch their slow breathing.

“It is ok to feel relief for yourself too.” I suck in a sharp breath at that. He doesn’t give me any time to process, let alone respond. “I will arrive before dinner with the food. Would six suit you?”

That hit a nerve. I take off my glasses and close my eyes. The fucker always knows... I just breathe for a moment. It’s still odd having someone in my life who sees me the way he does.

Slowly, the gears in my head switch back to the mundanity of the topic of food. “Yeah... Yes, that would be great. Thank you.” Something in my chest makes me continue, “Stay for dinner? I could give you the grand tour?”

Hannibal

Hannibal

“Welcome.” Hannibal said, graciously holding his front door open and stepping aside for his guests. His pleasant and polite smile fixed to his face. It didn’t take much effort; he was, in fact, looking forward to this evening.

Jack stepped in, a rare wide smile on his face. “Good evening, Hannibal. Thank you for having us. Let me introduce you to my lovely husband.” He turned, bringing Will, who was sheltering himself at Jack’s back, into the small circle they made with Hannibal. He rested a big hand on the back of Will’s neck, a possessive and proud gesture. A display in front of another Alpha, even one he considered a friend. “Will, this is Doctor Hannibal Lecter, Hannibal, this is Will Graham.”

Hannibal noted the lack of Crawford added to Will’s name. Progressive. Curious.

“Good to meet you.” Will said, not quite a mutter. His eyes were somewhere on Hannibal’s chest, likely tie. It was a striking lavender and coal paisley he knew would stand out against his chocolate brown plaid three-piece suit. It would have looked off if the brown fabric did not have shots of lavender and grey in the plaid as well.

Hannibal doesn’t acknowledge the lack of eye contact. Instead, he took the opportunity to look Will over well since Jack only had eyes for Will at that moment. He also didn’t reach out his hand for a handshake, guessing correctly that this man in front of him would not welcome the contact. “Pleasure is all mine, and congratulations to you both. Please, let me take your coats.”

They both moved to remove their coats and Hannibal helped Will out of his. He stiffened, surprised and turned to look Hannibal right in the eyes, for the only time that evening. Will’s eyes were fierce and wide. A question and challenge at the same time. Hannibal smiled placidly and was exceedingly careful not to touch Will at all in the process.

The moment, however brief, had set Hannibal’s mind that Will Graham was an intriguing person. The eye contact sent something akin to warmth through Hannibal’s body. Not a common occurrence for the man.

To dispel the tension from being noticed by Jack, Hannibal then turned to take Jack's coat from his hands too. Will watched him wearily. “Please, make yourself at home. Alana is already in the study. I will join you momentarily. I have the finishing touches for dinner to complete.” He turned, politely dismissing them as he hung their coats in the entry closet. Jack led Will, hand at his elbow, to the study.

-

Alone in the kitchen, Hannibal seared slices of the liver that had belonged to a particularly arrogant bank teller. He let his mind focus on processing Will’s appearance. He was clearly

beautiful, a fact not interesting in itself. What made Will's looks striking was how he tempers it with that soft but rugged finish. Or lack of finish. It showed through even though he was in an obviously nice suit, one which subtly matched Jack's. Hannibal wondered if that was intentional, and by which man? Despite the fine fabrics and expensive shoes, there was an unfinished, underdressed look about Will. Hannibal wondered if it was a genuine lack of care or perhaps, and more likely so, a part of his mask for the world. He was sure Will Graham must face quite a lot being the sole omega in the BAU, even with Jack as his shield.

Hannibal plated the food. Each an art piece of warm orange, deep purple and rich red against the rustic handmade grey pottery plates that he had chosen for tonight. He left them for a moment, safely under the heat lamp, to go join his guests.

He moved quietly, interested to hear a part of their conversation before he made himself known.

"We are celebrating your marriage, Jack. Just because you're choosing to forgo the honeymoon along with the wedding doesn't mean this is the time for talk about work." Alana said, good-naturedly scolding. "I'm sure even Will is sick of it."

Will chuckled lowly at that last bit. Hannibal was interested to hear him even slightly unguarded. "Not even our bed is safe from work, Alana. We are hopeless, Sorry." he replied, and Hannibal turned the corner. He let his footfall be loud enough to alert them to his presence. He entered the doorway in time to see Will's lopsided smile falter slightly then fell away as his hand retreated from Jack's knee at Hannibal's presence.

"Dinner is ready. If you would accompany me to the dining room." They stood as Hannibal continued, "Jack, Will," his head tipped, slight mischievous smile directed to Jack, "I'm afraid you'll find a small wedding gift for each of you at the table."

Will immediately looked over to Jack, eyes wide, but spoke to Hannibal, "Thank you, there really was no need though." he grabbed onto Jack's awaiting arm.

Jack pated the hand resting at the crook of his elbow and grinned at both Hannibal and Will. "Hannibal wasn't going to let us leave here without some kind of wedding gift, Will." Jack walked them both towards the door where Hannibal still waited. "Even though we told everyone no gifts." He said as he put a hand on Hannibal's shoulder, as they passed their host, in a silent thank you.

Will

Will

I struggle at the front door, trying to get the key in while carrying too many reusable grocery bags at a time. My left shoulder in particular feels like it's got the straps of the two bags trying to work their way between the joint.

I manage the lock, but now have the issue of working the door open without hitting the four excited dogs all gathered on the other side. “Back up. Back up!” All but Lucy listens, her little body getting swept to the side with the door. “I did say back up...” I look at her disapprovingly as she pokes her head around the door. She’s never taken as well to training as the others. She yips at me and takes off, zooming around the living room. I leave her to it and dump all my bags on the floor. The other dogs push past me to run outside, like they have been stuck inside for two days, not two hours. “Don’t go far! You’re all getting baths!” I yell after them. Lucy, hearing this darts out after them.

-

Alana wasn’t equipped to bathe four dogs, so they are slightly overdue, especially after the run this morning. Luckily, they don’t smell too bad and haven’t been in the house long enough to really make the place smell like dog. Yet...

Lucy, Max and Baxter lay out on the grass in the sunshine drying off as I finish rinsing off Harley. He’s easy with his short copper fur. The soap slides right off as he happily gives me his big pit bull grin. He’s quite a bit bigger than a pit though. Likely mixed with a lab. His tail thumps the porch as I hose off his chest. “Good boy.” He woofs softly at the praise.

Rinsing done, I snag the last dry towel on the railing and begin to dry Harley off. Being prone to excitement, Harley takes this to be a big-time cuddle/play-fest, so he takes to rolling around and trying to bite at the towel to play tug of war.

“No, no tug of war. Off, Harley.” He flops over, tummy up and tongue lolling out of his wide mouth. “Menace.” I take the opportunity to dry his stomach a bit then shoo him off to join the others in the sun.

The porch, expectedly, is a mess of soap runoff and clumps of multi-colored fur. I pick up all the used towels and discarded collars and hang them over the railing so I can rinse off the porch.

I watch the fur clumps drift along the rivulets of water. My eyes catch on the worn rough patches of the floorboards. They look ugly, the white paint faded to show the greying rough wood beneath. The water catches and pulls at these points and I imagine Hannibal’s undoubtable fancy Italian shoes stepping over them. His shrewd eyes taking in the state of this place. Humble and neglected. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked him over. This place isn’t ready.

Nervous energy starts to fill me. With the porch rinsed, I fold the hose to stop the water and quickly walk around the corner to shut off the faucet and set to tidying up before he arrives.

-

I spent too long fussing around the house. I only noticed once I refolded the two throw blankets on the sofa for the third time. So now I'm late.

My hair is still wet, and I am standing in front of the open dresser drawer staring at my shirts. A cold drop falls on my neck and rolls down my bare back, making me shiver.

Is a T-shirt too casual? I go to the closet and look at the hanging button-down shirts in there. Hannibal would make anyone feel like a slob compared to him and his usual extravagant suits. I look at the meager options. Alana wasn't exaggerating when saying I got rid of everything tied to Jack. That included most of my wardrobe, abandoned like almost everything else in that house. I just can't stand keeping all that stuff. The stuff that made me *his.* The clothes I have left truly feel inadequate. Even though this isn't anything. It doesn't matter what I wear.

The dogs outside start barking. My head whips over to the open window above the dresser. Through the screen, Max and Harley run down the drive to meet the dark Bently pulling up to the house. Shit.

I reach blindly into the closet. As the car parks, I catch his eye through his front windshield while slipping on the shirt. His usual placid expression subtilty shifts to an almost smile. He's the first to break eye contact as he turns off his car and gets out. Released, I finish buttoning the shirt, which I now realize is a simple unbleached linen. Not bad with brown pants.

I'm jittery as I swing the screen door open and lean against the frame to keep it from swinging back. "Hey." I say as I watch Hannibal pull out a cooler from his trunk. It's larger than the one sitting in my kitchen.

He shuts the trunk. Not locking his car and walking over. Crisp looking as always even as he's made concessions for the heat. His light blue summer jacket is open over a simple white dress shirt. It makes him look perfectly picturesque against the field with its wildflowers and the forest backdrop that surrounds us.

"Good afternoon, Will." That smile from the car returns. Somehow chipper for such a mild expression. He steps up the porch to me. "You look well. The country air must suit you."

"Thanks. You look ready for a picnic." It's true. He stands in front of me. He's not that much taller than me. Even this close it wouldn't take much to look up to meet his eyes again, but I don't. Instead focusing back on the wildflowers. I could see him out there. Quintessential red checkered picnic blanket and all. I'm pretty sure dad has an actual picnic basket somewhere too.

"Next time we can make it a picnic." Next time... no maybe, no could. Just next time. I look into his eyes at that. They crinkle at the corners. It feels like a reward. "I'm afraid the food I intend to prepare for dinner doesn't adapt well to eating on the floor."

I can’t help myself, “Next time sounds good.” A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth and I notice all the nervousness I had about him being here is gone. He hasn’t once peered around to notice the old porch or glanced over my shoulder into the house yet. So now I want to show him. “Come in. I’ll show you around.”

I reach down for the cooler to take it from him, but he moves it away. That simple smile, still on his broad mouth. “Thank you. Lead the way.” Hannibal is chivalrous to the core. The fact he usually doesn't make it overt or showy is what keeps me from bristling when it comes from him. It’s sweet, in its own way.

He switches the cooler to his other hand and reaches out. For a moment he’s close enough for me to smell his aftershave, bergamot and something, as he brackets me in on one side. His hand is holding the screen door open for me to go in first. I try not to notice how good he smells. That aftershave mixes well with his natural alpha scent. Warm, earthy and almost sweet. I breathe shallowly and head inside.

His leather sole shoes tap against the wood floor as he takes a few steps in. His steps stall and the cooler thunks softly on the floor. I turn back to him to see what's the hold up. He’s sitting on the arm of the chair closest to the front door, taking off his shoes. Brisk in revealing pastel pink socks of all things. The color next to the sky blue of his slacks reminds me of easter decorations.

I must be making a confused face because in answer to my expression, he pointedly looks at my feet. I glance down. My feet are only in mismatched black and brown socks. One of which is darned at the heel in orange thread. Right... I never put shoes on.

“You don’t have to. I was just in a bit of a rush to get dressed when you arrived.” I rub at the back of my neck. He finishes removing his shoes and sets them neatly by the door. I’m suddenly really glad I washed the floors today, as he pads over to the coat rack. He removes and hangs his jacket and picks up the cooler again. For a beat, I just look at him. Hannibal sock footed and bare of his typical jacket and waistcoat is...unusual.

“I noticed.” he says, his voice flat, but there's a glint of something, humor maybe in his eyes as he meets mine. I feel heat creeping up my neck and ears, suddenly self-conscious that he saw me shirtless earlier. It’s not a big deal. He’s seen me in less in the hospital.

I turn and head to the kitchen. “Uh, let's put that food away first.” I’m not blushing. I’m not. Why would I be? I flick on the switch for the ceiling fans as I pass them.

The fans’ gentle breeze feels good against my skin. “Kitchen’s just back here. If you ever need the washroom, it's up those stairs.” I point to the open door by the desk in the hallway. “The door on your right.”

I glance back at him, making sure he sees my gesture. He nods and looks around the hall that also acts as an office. It’s still pretty bare in here, save for my father’s paintings. He focuses on one. The one of me as a boy fishing, standing in my father’s, too big for me, boots. I give him a moment to look, but he doesn’t move on like I expect.

“My dad would paint; those are all his. Actually, most of the art in here is his.” I join Hannibal to look at the painting. It’s not technically amazing. I know Hannibal could probably do far better, though I’ve never heard him talking about painting. His drawings speak for themselves. I don’t have a doubt he could paint just as well. Hannibal stays quiet, looking intently at the painting. I start to feel a bit protective of my dad’s painting but curious to know his opinion all the same. I watch him look his fill.

“Your father paints with feeling. It’s quite beautiful. This is you, is it not?” He turns his intent gaze to me, and I feel caught in it. The guard I built up dissolves at his statement.

“Yeah... yeah it's me.” I tear my eyes away and look back at the painting that was made almost 30 years ago. I can feel his eyes still on me. Observing. “We didn’t have the money to buy kid’s gear, so I learned with his. Too big and too awkward for me to be any good at it for a good long while.”

“He was proud of you anyways.” he says softly.

It makes my heart ache that he can read that from the painting. “I know.”

Dad’s with us now. I don’t turn to look, but I can hear him right next to Hannibal. “You caught your first fish that day, y’know? Tiny little thing, and you insisted we put it back.” His hand squeezes my shoulder.

I swallow the lump in my throat and walk into the kitchen, disbursing the presence of my father. Hannibal follows. “It’s nothing to your kitchen, but I’m pretty sure I got most everything you’ll need for dinner.”

Hannibal sets the cooler on the old table under the window. The kitchen gets a once over, with sharp eyes. Nothing like the eyes he had while looking at the painting. He gives a brisk nod of approval and sets to unpacking his cooler.

I let out a short laugh, “Glad you approve.”

“I appreciate the luxury of my kitchen, but one does not need a grand kitchen to make a good meal. Your kitchen is obviously equipped and well used. A family kitchen.”

“My father liked to bake. He loved this kitchen.” It was a big reason he picked this house when we could finally afford to buy something together.

Hannibal looks over his shoulder at me from his position in front of the open fridge and gives a rare and sly grin. “You’ll have to show me if you learned anything from him one day.”
I grin back. “I can make a mean apple crumble. Very complicated.”

“Crumbles are an art of balancing flavors instead of elaborate technique.” He always does that. Undercuts my self-deprecating jokes. Not in a way I feel scolded for doing it. Just matter-of-factly turning them to praise. It warms me.

“I’ll make some for the picnic.” I say, slightly shy. I’m not entirely sure if the whole picnic idea earlier was serious or not. But I’d like it to be.

He closes the fridge, done with the food ‘til it's time to cook, and comes towards me. “I’d like that.” He lightly touches me on my upper arm. So light that I barely feel it through the linen shirt sleeve. “You promised me a tour.”

So, I show him around. I show him out the kitchen door where I chop wood and the laundry lines are. Then back to the hall with the workbench and desk that stand tiny and unused for now. He doesn’t comment much until we get to my ‘bedroom’ in the dining section of the living room.

“You have an upstairs, why do you sleep out in the living room.” he asks and moves towards the living room side, peering at the books that have been scattered around for a decade now.

I shrug, though I don’t think he sees it. “It’s warmer down here.” which is true. Heating upstairs requires using the old oil heaters. Except for the bathroom because the chimney runs through it too.

He looks at me then. I know he knows I’m dodging. “What’s up there now?” He already knows the answer. I can see it in his eyes.

“I’ll show you.” I offer.

He briskly drops the old forensic journal he was looking at back onto the small piano and almost seems perky at the prospect.

I huff a laugh at him and jerk my head back in the direction of the hall. “Common, then.”

We climb the narrow stairs up to the second floor. The little landing is dark from the lack of windows, but as I open the door directly in front of the stairs light reemerges. Dusky and sheer, unlike downstairs.

My cleaning spree hadn’t reached this room. Boxes are set haphazardly on the old bed frame and floor. The rest of my dad’s bedroom furniture is mostly left as it was, except for extra chairs and odds bits. I let Hannibal walk in before me.

He is immediately drawn to the leaning stacks of canvasses by the desk at the dormer window. “Your father was a prolific painter.” He quickly flips through them.

“Yeah, he always did, but when he got sick... he really focused on it.” Dad liked the outdoors. Taught me everything I know really. Being able to hunt, fish and fend for ourselves really made a difference when things were hard. But once his heart started to give out, he became nearly obsessed with painting. The room is filled with them. “There are more around the corner.” I tell Hannibal.

He finishes looking through the stack he’s at then checks out the one I pointed to too. They sit stacked at least 2 feet deep against the bathroom door. He’s quiet for a while and I take in the room. It’s caked in dust. I really should clean this next.

Hannibal pulls out a medium sized canvas and brings it back into the light of the window. “Who is this?”

I leave my position by the door to see which painting he's looking at. The dormer is narrow, and I have to squeeze up next to him to see. He's got a portrait of my mother. One of many in this room. Though this one is close up and very detailed. Based on the pictures I've seen of her, it's probably one of the best my dad managed from memory.

"That's my mother." I say quietly. There is a tentativeness that hangs in the air.

"You don't speak of her." he's just as quiet as he keeps looking at her face.

"She died when I was very young. I don't remember her." She looks to be about my age in that painting.

"I am sorry to hear that. Your father must have loved her dearly. Most of these are of her."

"They were mated. Losing her... I think I was the only thing keeping him from going after her."

He looks at me then. Our eyes lock and in the confined space and the quiet warm air, I feel my skin break out in goosebumps. That tentative feeling turns heavy as the moment stretches out to what feels like infinity.

I become aware of my heartbeat in my throat, and I feel like something's about to rupture.

He sets the portrait on the desk leaning against the window and turns to fully face me. The canvas blocks more of the light from coming in through the yellow curtains, casting us in deeper shadows. The harshness of his features stands out in the dimmer light and darkens his eyes. I feel penned as I back into the wall. I'm not trapped. There's plenty of space for me to just walk away and I know he'd let me. But something about his gaze keeps me there. He is not even a foot away; I can feel the heat of him over the stuffy heat of the room and in this moment he's all I can smell too.

He reaches out, slowly. Slowly enough for me to notice and react if I want to. I don't. I'm stuck between curiosity and an odd kind of fear. With both hands, his long fingers brush my hair away from my eyes, and then one hand ghosts over the side of my face, as his thumb brushes across my cheekbone. I can't help my eyes flutter closed at the contact. Breaking the spell.

"You look remarkably like her, though you must have your father's eyes." he says, taking a half step away, giving me more room as he's looking over to the painting of my mother again.

-

Hannibal rolls up his sleeves at the kitchen sink. He has me sitting at the kitchen table with a glass of wine after insisting I need to rest.

"You are still not fully recovered, Will and moving is taxing." He peers over his shoulder as he washes his hands. "And I doubt you let the movers handle everything themselves."

“Oh, your movers were *very* concerned with the idea of little omega me carrying in some boxes.” I roll my eyes. Petulant, maybe, but I’m still annoyed over it.

“You may find it pleasant one day to occasionally let others handle things.” He found the cutting board and is on the hunt for the knives now.

“Second drawer, left side of the oven.” He finds them. “I let you arrange the movers for me. Didn't I.”

“I did not give you a chance to object or you would have tried to rent a u-haul and do it by yourself. Likely ending back in the hospital for your trouble.”

“I wouldn’t have ended up in the hospital. I’m fine now. Would have just taken longer.”

Hannibal just levels me a look at that. Ok fine, I may have been pretty fatigued after the run in the forest with the dogs this morning. And I can feel the exhaustion of the past few days of unpacking making my limbs heavy now that I’m sitting comfortably, watching him cook. Truthfully, I don’t even have that restless need to help out, like I usually do when he cooks for me.

There's something comfortable about Hannibal being in my kitchen that isn’t there when I’m in his. I’d expect him to look out of place here. To stand in stark contrast like he usually does to most settings except his home. But he doesn’t, something about the worn edges and scuffs of the kitchen my father and I built ourselves and his bare forearms and pink socks settle him into the space. I like this version of Hannibal.

“Thank you for organizing the movers. It was helpful.” I give in. In return, he smiles that slight smile of his that’s mostly in his eyes, at me.

“You’re very welcome, Will.”

-

We ate dinner at the little kitchen table.

He made a rich French onion soup that was followed by a small medallion steak and steered broccoletti. I thought it would be too heavy for the warm summer night, but trust in Hannibal to always pick the perfect dish.

Now we are sitting on the sofa with a glass of whisky each. All the dogs are piled on their beds in front of the unlit fireplace. Conversation has been easy all night. Never light, but easy.

We’ve fallen into a moment of comfortable silence, and I watch the dogs sleep at our feet. I’ve pulled the soft forest green throw blanket on the arm, into my lap a while ago. Not for its warmth, but because running my hand through its fine tassels is soothing.

Like always Hannibal is watching me. He looks from my face to the motion my hand is making in the blanket and back. I can feel him thinking. He’s going to ask something. The moment lasts longer than usual for Hannibal. He’s usually pretty direct.

I shift lazily to lean more against the armrest so I can watch him better in return. My posture mirrors his. My eyes fall to his unbuttoned collar and his sharp collarbones beneath. Barely visible. Unbidden comes the urge to see it further unbuttoned. To find out how far the light-colored chest hair peeking out travels. I shake that thought away.

The only time I've seen Hannibal this imperfectly dressed was after Tobias Budge tried to kill him. But this isn't disheveled and shocky. He's relaxed. Now that I see him relaxed, I realize all the times before when he seemed so, he was just cool, calm, and collected. Hannibal relaxed is like a big cat, lazing up in his tree, watching for something interesting.

I seem to be that something interesting.

"You're thinking something. Out with it. I don't bite." I say as a bit of a tease at his silence.

"We both know that's not true." He actually smirks and it makes the comment almost flirtatious. But he continues, "I wish to know more about your patents' bond. Being raised by mated parents is rare, raised by a widowed mate is rarer still."

That's not where I thought his head was at. I wasn't exactly sure, but his reticence made me assume he was going to bring up Jack. We haven't talked of Jack all night. It's been nice actually.

"It was… hard. Like I said I think my father would have happily followed her after the accident. But he really tried his best with me." I can feel the shade of my father sitting at the piano behind me. Soft sad notes ringing through the air that I know Hannibal can't hear.

"Suicide rates are much higher after a person loses their mate. Alphas in particular tend to handle it worse. Violent outbursts, erratic emotions… our society doesn't rear our Alphas with the emotional tools to cope well with such extreme pain."

I scoff at that "and places the burden of that upon omegas and beta women." I stop myself from falling into a sexism rant. We both know full well everything I could say. Instead, I focus on further answering to Hannibal's curiosity. "Luckily my father was omegan, like me. Though for him to make his way, an omega man, an anomaly, in this world, single and with a child... We were poor. Flitted from boat yard to boat yard. He'd do whatever odd job that would let him in. But it never lasted long. Wasn't safe to stick around."

Dad continues to play in the background. I can hear the creak of the stool he's sitting on as he solidifies in my mind, in this space

"Your family is a complication of rarities. It is no wonder that you turned out like no other." He pauses as that comment sinks into me. It's odd, knowing he's fascinated by what goes on in my head. Normally I'd be shoving him so far away from me for that, like everyone else. But he doesn't make me feel like an odd bug he'd wish to pin down and dissect. Rather it feels like appreciation and admiration. Which makes me uncomfortable in a whole other way.

"This one sees you, son. Sees you like Jack couldn't… or wouldn't." Dad says as he stops playing. I want to look back at him. See his face. But that would alert Hannibal.

Before I can really start to squirm under both their comments hanging in the air, Hannibal continues, “It must have been extremely hard for him to make his way in the world alone while responsible for a child. And harder still for you to grow up in the results of his pain and struggles.”

“We made do and he taught me how to as well. Looks like I’m going to need those skills now. Widowed single omega and all.” I’m getting truly tired now. The whiskey is sitting warm in my stomach. I don’t think dad is there anymore. But the echos of the song he had played mixes with the crickets outside and feels like a lullaby

“You are not alone, Will Graham.” Hannibal leans forward and places his big hand over the knee of the leg I have curled up onto the sofa. “Not with me as your friend.”

I think I just blink at him tired and stupidly. The warmth of the whiskey is spreading from my stomach to my chest.

He pats my knee and stands. “However, it is late. You seem tired and in need of rest. Some of the food I brought for you requires minor preparations before eating. There are instructional notecards for you to follow. Thank you for the lovely evening.” He makes his way around the sofa and to the door, which is what finally breaks me into action.

I haul myself off the sofa and follow him. “Thank you for coming and bringing the food. I really appreciate it.”

He puts on his shoes and jackets once more and I open the door for him.

He holds the screen door open and turns back to me. “My pleasure, Will. And…” his hand is on my shoulder by my neck, thumb laying gently against my pulse point. “I mean this sincerely, anything you need. I’m here”

Despite my half-asleep state, my heart picks up. I wonder if he can feel it. “Thank you, Hannibal.” My hand is on his forearm that's connecting us without me deciding to move. His shirt sleeve is still rolled up. The hair over his firm skin there is soft. “Good night.” I basically whisper. The night feels too delicate for anything louder.

His eyes smile at me and then he leaves.

Hannibal

Hannibal

Hannibal was restless. He found himself with the urge to get up and pace. A display he'd never make in front of a patient. He crossed his legs and fortified the mask of non-judgmental interest on his face. His newest patient, Franklyn Froideveaux, was referred to him by an old colleague.

Franklyn was, at that moment, sniffling and talking about his mother. "-a great woman, but cold. I think the last time she hugged me; I was four."

Hannibal already knew this patient was going to bore him immensely.

He tuned Franklyn out just enough to focus on more interesting thoughts, but still do his job. He selected the topic of his next dinner party. However, he found his thoughts traveled to Jack's husband. It had been a year since the dinner party Will attended. Hannibal was puzzled by how miffed he was that Will never accepted another invitation. Each time Jack would attend alone, Hannibal would find himself drifting into thoughts of that ever-absent Omega.

He found himself frustrated by the fixation. A fixation he could not control did not happen to Hannibal Lecter. He contemplated killing the omega just to be done with it.

Will

Will

I spent the next few days obsessing. Stuck in a loop of picking apart the other night with Hannibal and distracting myself with house repairs. Though more usually doing a project *and* thinking about Hannibal.

Like now, I'm on my hands and knees sanding down the porch floor. Cicadas and the sound of the dogs playing far out in the field fill the warm morning air. But my mind is back upstairs. The moment with us tucked in the dormer window replays. The feeling of his cool thumb on my cheek. I don't get what it means.

I get to a particularly rough patch and am careful not to over sand the damaged wood. That was far from the first time he touched me. Hannibal uses touch often. I know that. I also know he isn't immune to the odd pull alphas feel towards omegas and vice versa, making the usual touch barriers blurry. But his touching has always been deliberate. With a purpose. More importantly, I could always pick out the reason he would touch me. Sometimes it was to be grounding, reassuring, supportive, clinical, or damn even just friendly. But this didn't feel like any of that. I'd assume it was sexual from anyone else, but it didn't have that feel either. Not really.

I'm mostly done with the floor. I'm dreading the process of sanding down all the railings and pillars. Maybe I can just sand the really bad bits and paint over the rest?

My true frustration isn't with not knowing Hannibal's motives. It's more not liking my own reactions to it. In the moment, I couldn't process much beyond that it was happening. But now, remembering the sensations of that moment, the smell of him, the contrast between his cool hands and the heat in my cheeks. Just the close brittleness of the air between us. I want it again. Maybe I'm touched starved. Jack and I had an active sex life, but he wasn't exactly affectionate.

I decide to just spot sand and paint, I can't be bothered to detail this whole thing. It doesn't truly need it.

Before starting, I go to bring out the radio from the kitchen and the next few hours pass by better with something other than just my thoughts to help occupy me.

-

I work until my phone starts to ping. I left it inside when I put the dogs in before I started painting, but I can clearly hear it through the open windows. Just having finished the first coat of paint, I decide it's a good time to take a break and deal with lunch. So, I go around to the side entrance and am greeted by the dogs, over excited from being cooped up in the house knowing I'm outside.

“You got to wait ‘til the paint is dry, sorry buds.” I say as I pass by them. They follow close on my heels, all the way to the dresser where my phone is. The bi-monthly reminder to take my suppressants flashes on the screen. Right, it’s Wednesday. I swipe the notification away and slip the phone in my pocket.

With a detour to the kitchen to grab a glass, I head upstairs to the bathroom. A blister of heat suppressant pills sit tucked in my toiletry bag. I hadn’t bothered to unpack it yet

I only notice the problem after popping a pill free and drinking it down with the glass of water. The blister is empty. It only had one pill. Two weeks. I know that’s not right. I check the bag again. I know I have another full blister.

It's not there. My stomach sinks. I look again. Nothing. I dump the whole of its contents out into the sink and search through it with fingers that are starting to tremble. Still nothing.

I know I packed it. I know I had packed it from the house. I remember thinking I had four months' worth. Time enough to figure something out. Hopefully.

Where is it!? I rush downstairs and look under my bed. I yank out the suitcase I took with me to the hotel and checked its insides. Empty.

The hotel, did I leave it there? It’s nowhere so I must have. I can’t remember. Oh God, I can’t remember.

Flashes of disorientation and coming too from blackouts fill my head. Intercut with Jack, strung upside down. The stupid jester costume so soaked I couldn’t tell what's blood and what’s the red of the fabric.

I feel like I’m going to throw up. I run to the kitchen sink and brace against the counter. My chest feels like it’s trying to cave in on itself, not letting the bile pass.

I reach to turn on the facet for some cool water and my hands are marred in red. Jack’s blood all over again. The dissociated fog I found myself in that day is back. Me, kneeling in his blood, it all over my hands. Did I? Did I do this?

And that sends me over the edge. My stomach heaves and the remnants of breakfast spill into the sink.

As soon as I stop throwing up, I’m washing my hands. My hands that are covered in Jack’s blood and not at the same time. The vomit in the sink swirling down the drain shifts to blood and back to half-digested food. Part of me vaguely knows which is real. But I can’t stop washing ‘til the sink is clear and there's nothing but silver metal and clear water to see. The sight of the crystalline water falling from the faucet is somehow soothing. I am not sure how long I just stare at it. But long enough for the crushing in my chest to ease, my hands to ache from the cold water, and the panic to ebb from panic attack to just ‘I’m truly fucked’.

I shut off the water and attempt a deep breath. The air feels forced and unnatural beneath my phantom sore ribs, but it helps clear my head, so I do it again. It was just a panic attack. I need to think. Figure this out.

I should call the hotel. I doubt they'd have kept medication left in the room but it's only been about a week. There's a chance. I can't face a call right now though.

Does dad have any still? I go back upstairs. Careful to walk, not run. I feel like if I run, I'll fall back into a panic attack. Each step feels like five, but I make it and start to search the bathroom. I know it's in vain and the panic rises like the bile did up my throat with each emptied cabinet.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

The floor is littered with my dad's long expired products that I had neglected to clear out. He stopped having heats years before he died. There's nothing.

The radio show I was listening to out on the porch rushes in my ears. Echoing against the bathroom tiles like the clash of cymbals.

"With the new legislation limiting access to all forms of birth control without a beta man or alpha spouse's consent, Omegas are facing an extremely risky heat."

"How is this heat different than a typical heat of those who don't take suppressants, doctor?"

"Proper medical practice would be to wean patients off suppressants. Allowing their body to acclimate back to their natural cycle and hormone levels. The consequence of this, honestly barbaric, legislation is that going cold turkey on these meds reaps havoc on the body. Omegas in this situation will face extreme effects. Some could be slammed with an unexpected heat out of nowhere. Others may face a prolonged heat. Worse are the pheromonal effects. We know cases of alpha on omega rape and violent assault are at its highest the week before and during an omega's heat. Going off these meds can put some omegas in that heightened pheromone state for months before their body goes into heat. Not to mention the emotional and physical distress side effects that will be exacerbated for those who this will be a stressful or dangerous experience." The doctor's voice was professionally livid. I wasn't really focusing on the program then, still caught in a half state of thinking of Hannibal, focusing on the painting and listening. But now the word pulse around me like a warning siren.

I start work next week... I don't know what to do. The sheer loss of any mode of recourse, Jack's death, the encephalitis, the being cut from fieldwork, everything. I feel like that lost hungry little kid I was so long ago, and I fucking miss my dad. All of it, finally has me spilling over. Tears I hadn't shed roll down my cheeks and my chest hurts again. Not with panic but with sobs this time. My body shakes with them. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and turn away. A mess. Pathetic. Useless.

I fish my phone out of my pocket and search blindly through it with shaky fingers. I hit call. The ring drowns out the sirens and I swallow down my sobs. I'll need to speak. One escapes me at the second ring, and I work harder. Biting my tongue so hard it might bleed. But my mouth already tastes like metal, so I can't tell, and I don't care.

Time stills after the fourth ring. The moment before the next feels like the moment between breaths.

“Hello, Will.” Hannibal’s steady reassuring voice sends a violent shiver through me.

I can’t do anything. I feel like if I let off pressure from my tongue or even take a breath I’ll fall apart again.

“Will?” Hannibal’s tone has shifted. I close my eyes, focusing on his voice. Curious, but mildly so. I have to say something. I can’t.

“Are you there?” sharper now with some unease. I push the phone harder against my ear.

“Hannibal?” it comes out choked and weak. Thick with the tears and despair. The utter pleading in it sends me into sobs again.

“Will. Tell me where you are.” A command.

“Home.” I manage to get out. Forming words feels like ripping something out of me. I’m shutting down.

“I’m coming. Now. Can you move?” He’s coming. Oh, thank God. I can hear a door slam on his end.

I swallow my breath again to push the sobs back down. It works. “Yes. Not injured.”

“Go lay down on your bed or sofa. You have plenty of blankets, use them.” I’m already moving, follow instructions. I use my free hand to grip tightly to the stair rail. I feel shaky and unsteady as hell.

“Will, tell me you understand and will wait for me, resting and warmed.” A car engine starts in the background.

“Yes” It’s all I can manage.

“Good. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” he hangs up. The loss of his voice hurts. It’s only tempered by the knowing that he’s coming.

I make it to the living room. The dogs all get up from their beds and whine and rub against my legs. I know they are concerned for me, but I just can’t. I have nothing to give right now.

Hannibal said either the sofa or the bed. I look between the two. I snatch up the blankets from the sofa and head to the bed just a couple yards away. Dogs following in tow. My head is emptying, and I feel exhausted and numb. I focus on making a nest of my pillows and blankets. He said to be warm. Sleet is running through my veins. I reach over and grab the camel knit blanket over the back of the armchair next to the dresser. I kick off my shoes and get it.

The last thought I have before blinking out: Hannibal is coming.

-

The first thing I become aware of while resurfacing from the inky darkness of the first dreamless sleep I've had in a long while, are fingers carding through my hair.

Their movements are soft and careful to avoid the tangles that tend to develop in my curls. It kind of tickles.

I shift and press my head harder into the hand, seeking firmer pressure.

There's a deep chuckle in response and that jolts me all the way awake. Hannibal.

"I take that means you prefer firm pressure over gentle?" he says. The chuckle lingers in his voice.

I look over my shoulder at Hannibal to see him really sitting there. On my bed. Leaning back on a borrowed pillow from the sofa propped against the headboard.

He looks settled in like he's been there a while. Just petting my hair and watching me sleep.

I groan, roll back over, and bury my face into the mass of pillows and blankets I made. The embarrassment and shame twists my still sensitive stomach and turns every inch of my skin blisteringly hot. I'd kick off all the blankets if they weren't my only shield from him at the moment.

He tisks at me. Far more playfully I'd expect after the state I was in over the phone. The lightness of his mood somehow helps. Teasing is better than disdain. Some of the complicated knots of shame loosens.

Hannibal's fingers weave back in my hair and this time he presses the pads of his fingers into my scalp. Another groan escapes me, entirely unbidden. This time it's certainly not one of displeasure. His hands move with purpose, less the gentle petting of before and more an intentional massage. And of course, Hannibal would be good at giving massages.

Despite everything, I melt.

We stay like that for what feels like 10 minutes. The cry of cicadas and smell of the drying paint drifts through the open windows. Even with being hyper aware of Hannibal, he has me lulling, on the border of drifting off again.

That's when he breaks the silence, "I have an apology for you."

That's not right. I should be the one to apologize here. I turn, fully this time, to look at him. My face must say everything.

He smiles oh so gently. It makes me frown further.

"In my hurry to reach you, I failed to notice the wet paint on your porch. I fear I may have marred it." He pauses, "and tracked some in onto your floor. It's only a step. I noticed soon enough and removed my shoes." He looks only slightly chagrined.

I couldn't care less about the floors and wave him off. Ridiculously, there is something I do want to know though. I prop up on one elbow and look down towards the end of the bed. He has his long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles over the blankets. Sage green socks. They stand out against the navy of his slacks.

"I will pay for the floor to be fixed." He continues. Obviously ignoring my dismissal of the issue.

I wave it off again, more emphatically.

"Will." It's a call to attention. I don't want to look at him and nothing comes out my mouth.

He waits a beat longer than it should take me to respond in some way.

"It appears you are nonverbal at the moment. If that's correct tap my palm once." He lays his hand on his thigh closest to me, palm up, directly in my field of view.

I think about just giving him a thumbs up or nodding instead. The part of me that woke up last weekend wants some point of physical contact with Hannibal back badly since his hand left my head. I don't know how to feel about that.

His hand sits there, waiting. I tap it once.

Propped up like this Hannibal is mostly behind me. His voice though is please, his satisfied doctor voice. "Good. Have you eaten lunch? One for yes, two for no."

I tap twice and this time he catches my hand. I don't try to slip it out of his grasp. "I will make you some lunch. Something light, I think. Stay. Rest." He squeezes my hand, then lets go. Leaving the bed and the room entirely.

I fall back onto the bed fully with a deep sigh. Releasing the breath I didn't realize I held when his hand closed around mine. It was so warm.

I hear him shoo the dogs from the kitchen. I make two sharp clicks of the tongue, calling them all over. Even Lucy comes obediently. They all peer over the edge of the bed, some standing on their hind legs to do so.

I pet each of their heads. Dole out plenty of chin and ear scratches to reassure them, then point over to the living room. They trot over and pile onto their beds.

Hannibal is surprisingly quiet in the kitchen. Always is. Where I would be banging and clacking shit together, he's all grace. It's like he's got it all choreographed and memorized.

I just lay here, staring at the ceiling. Half thinking of how to explain myself and half trying to guess what Hannibal is making from the sounds and scents.

-

He comes back balancing two wicker trays with food in each hand. I sit up. Blankets fall off me and I welcome the cooler air. It smells like chicken. He sets one on the dresser, then pads

over to me. I'm about to get up when, with a hand on my shoulder, he pushes me gently back to bed. My eyebrows shoot up and I look into his mahogany eyes. I'm telegraphy my surprise loud and clean. It makes him laugh and I can't help a bit of a smile from forming too.

"A rare concession, I know. I have served breakfast in bed before, but I admit, I have never had lunch in bed. However, you should stay resting for now." My attention peaks at the breakfast in bed comment. Hannibal has never spoken of lovers with me. In a way, it's hard to picture him as something as pedestrian as a boyfriend. Strangely, I don't like the idea. Someone in his bed after staying the night. Him bringing in breakfast, no doubt on a fucking silver tray. I push that absurd feeling aside. This meal in bed isn't romantic, the breakfasts may not have been either. Not that it should matter either way.

I'm so caught up in my ridiculous thoughts, I fail to catch when Hannibal starts to rearrange my pillow into a more upright position. I stop him with a hand to his wrist. He pauses and I take over. I'm not dying, just an idiot. I can arrange my own damn pillows.

He waits with bemusement lurking in his eye then hands me my tray and goes to retrieve his. I'm starving the moment I properly see the food. It's one of the remaining meals he had left for me. Baked glazed chicken with some fancy multicolored rice.

Hannibal settles in next to me, and the sight of him stalls me out before I can rudely start shoveling food into my face.

He's all rolled up sleeves, tidy waistcoat, and legs, just comfortably ready to eat out of an old try on my damn bed. The word surreal doesn't even begin to cover it. Laughter escapes from me.

I laugh so hard that he picks up my tray from my lap and holds it aloft so nothing spills. It feels like more of the knots in my chest come loose and I'm purging some of the horribleness sticking to my insides like thick tar.

It's not a long fit of laughter, I'm calming back down quick. I can't help but look at him again. Take in his ever-mild expression that's amusement and slight concern as he watches me. I'm so relieved he's here. So touched that he came and is eating lunch with me out of a tray in my fucking bed, just because he thinks I need it.

I let out a slow jittery breath through pursed lips and find my voice again. "Thank you, Hannibal. Thank you for coming."

"Of course." He says, perfunctory like it's an obvious fact of the universe that he would come. That settles, warm, into my bones. He passes me my tray back. "Whenever you need." That makes me warmer, and I'm caught in his stare again.

"Eat, it will get cold." He focuses back on his food and starts eating. I follow suit and try not to wolf it down. Even though I really want to. It's, of course, delicious.

I expect him to set to asking what the fuck happened, but he doesn't. Not while we eat. Not while we clean up together, I have to insist I am perfectly capable of helping. He waits until after we make tea, chamomile at his instruction, and settle onto the sofa.

We sit on either end. It's a small sofa so we aren't more than a foot apart. The open space though has me feeling uneasy. I blindly tap the back of the sofa, forgetting I took all the blankets to the bed. Never mind then… I tuck further into my corner.

He sets his mug and small plate that he's using as a makeshift saucer, onto the coffee table and gets up. He goes over to the bed and pulls two blankets free of the jumble I had been in.

"Please Will, tell me what happened." He offers me the blankets. I set my own mug and 'saucer' down to take them. I tuck my feet up and spread the blankets over myself. When he sits back down my feet touch his leg.

I shift to pull them away, but he grabs one. "It's ok." He squeezes and pulls the blanket to cover them and his legs.

I watch his fingers play with the fabric slowly. Not a nervous gesture, just tactile sensation. My thoughts are jumbled. The heat of his thigh is warmer than the blankets. I try to pick what to say.

"Start from the beginning. Tell me that story." He guides. It helps and I tell him.

"Two weeks. I do worry about you going through a withdrawal heat so soon after recovering. It heightens the already considerable risks." He says. My stomach sinks. I hadn't thought about that aspect yet.

"How? How could it be worse?" I don't really want to know.

"I am mainly concerned about the possible high fevers. You may be recovered in the sense of no longer in need of constant medical monitoring, but your brain is still on the journey to full recovery. High fevers so soon wouldn't be good for that process." He's frowning slightly like he's puzzling something out while explaining to me.

"How likely are fevers?" I ask more because I need him to keep talking, not because knowing will help.

"A mild fever is typical of heats and ruts. For withdrawal heats, about thirty percent experience high fevers." He sips his tea, reminding me of mine. I pick it back up again and sip too. I don't really like chamomile, but I can't deny its effects. Hannibal takes a second sip and sits back too.

There's a moment of silence as he thinks, then he sets his tea down again and pulls out his phone. "You said you may have left the rest in the hotel?"

"Yeah" I hesitate, "I don't remember" It feels like a confession, even though I said it all moments ago. "It's the only thing I can think of. But they most likely threw it out by now." My hope for it being there still is next to none.

"Perhaps." He says before he put the phone to his ear.

"Hannibal, I can call them-" he shuts me up with a hand back on my food. He pushes his thumb steadily into my arch and begins to massage lazily as someone picks up. It feels good.

“Good afternoon. A room was reserved under the name Will Graham. The checkout date was the twenty-fourth. I would like to know if anything was left in the room, specifically any medication, please?” he listens. All I hear is a faint buzz of a voice.

“Yes, I’ll hold.” He waits. I watch him.

My gratitude for his existence in my life threatens to be overwhelming. I swallow down more tea.

His hand continues to massage my foot. I’m stricken by the comfortable domesticity in the appearance of this moment.

“Yes.” Pause. “I understand, Thank you for checking.” He hangs up.

“No luck, huh?” My voice is thick. I drink more of the mildly sweet tea.

“Unfortunately, no.” He presses his lips into a thin line.

“Thank you for calling.” It’s the least I'm thankful for, but I don’t know how to express the magnitude of that feeling.

“It’s a far easier call for me to make than for you.” Ain’t that the fucking truth. “I would happily take more of the burden of this situation from you if I could. Calling was a small matter.”

My eyes start to smart. “Hannibal, I...” I don’t know how to continue that thought.

He’s still staring ahead of him, not looking at anything, just thinking. He picks up and sips his tea again.

“There’s nothing you can do Hannibal.” He’s trying to fix it or at least find a way to. I feel bad for making this a problem he feels like he needs to solve.

“I admit, I have not yet read the details of the extent the new legislation-” his tone is venomous on that word, “truly blockades doctors from providing for their patients adequately.”

“It only just passed last week.” I say. He looks stony. I hesitate, but then put my hand over his at my feet.

He looks at our hands, then up at me, still stone faced. I can’t read anything in his dark eyes beyond seeing something swarming in them. He turns his hand in mine, and we are holding hands as he says, “You will not be alone through this. I *will* help you.”

The intensity, the absolute statement of fact has me swallowing. Almost a startled gulp. I don’t know how to hold this moment or hold what he’s offering me. I don’t even know what he’s offering, but it’s something.

So, I make a stupid joke. One that has me appalled the moment it's out of my mouth, “You sure it's safe to be around me during a prolonged fucked up heat?”

I’m flirting, shockingly and badly because he doesn’t take it like that at all.

He pulls away. “I am a medical doctor. I can and have handled myself around ailing Omegas during heats. I can guarantee your safety.” Fuck. Stupid, stupid. Why did I say that?!

“No Hannibal, that's not what I meant...” Desperate to undo the insult, I reach for his hand again that's now in his lap. “I trust you.” Of course, I do. Out of everyone, I trust Hannibal Lecter.

He lets me take his hand and looks back at me. The intensity is gone and so is most of the hurt. “Would you rather be alone?” He asks.

Never have I seen Hannibal unsure and seeing the hint of it that seeps through his well-trained control drives me to my next words. “No. No I don’t. Help me, Hannibal.” In any other moment, I’d rather crawl into a hole and die there before letting that escape me, but I continue barely above a whisper, “You are my paddle after all.”

The intensity is back and his grip on my hand tightens. “Yes.” he says.

-

I’m standing, more like hesitating, outside the lab doors. I don’t want to go in. I just finished getting my shit out of the BAU’s offices, but I still have some things down here. I can hear Beverly, Price and Zeller in there.

Time to get this humiliation over with, I guess.

I push open the doors and walk in, careful not to look at anyone. I set down my quintessential ‘you’ve just got canned’ cardboard file box on one of the nearest autopsy tables.

“Will!” If Beverly weren’t so perpetually cool, that would have been a squeal. She does, however, launch herself at me. She hugs me tight, far too tight.

“Ow. Bev.” I wrap my arms around here anyways. She’s always, good naturedly, completely disregarded my whole ‘don’t like to be touched’ thing. I gotta say, right now, I appreciate it. She hugs me hard and long and the pressure and comfort makes me feel better.

“We’ve missed you.” She pulls back to look at me. Gives me a thorough once over. “You look well.” She says with deep suspicion, “Are you well?”

I huff at her, “Yeah. Never better.”

“Good.” Then she hauls back and punches my arm. “You scared the shit out of us, man. Never do that again.”

“For fuck’s sake Beverly. What the hell?” I match her almost yelling tone and rub the spot she punched. I’d be actually mad if it weren’t for the slight sheen in her eyes.

“Like that actually hurt...” she spits out. She leans against the autopsy table looking hard. It actually *did* hurt. “When we found you...” pause “and Jack. Like that.”

I soften, “I know.”

“Next time your brain is on fire you fucking tell someone, Asshole.” she’s almost snarling to cover up her other feelings.

“I’ll tell you.” I scoop her back up into a hug. “I’m sorry.” I’m apologizing for more than just not acknowledging that I was sick. Jack’s absence from the room is a suffocating presence in and of itself.

“Asshole.” She says again, but she hugs me back.

I look over her shoulder, Price and Zeller are watching us. They simultaneously raise a hand in greeting.

“Glad to have you back, Will.” Zeller says.

Bevely and I part. We all pretend to not notice her wipe her eyes.

“I’m not back.” I say. The room gets awkward. “I just need to pick up some of my stuff.

“We put it all in my top two desk drawers. Didn’t want people messing with your stuff.” Price says. Zeller picks at his gloves.

“Thank you.” I’ve always caused some tension with Price and Zeller. Not even half as bad as the other men on the team, but still, they seem different. I wouldn’t have expected them to be this thoughtful. I pick up my box and head over to the side room.

“Just don’t go into his bottom left drawer!” Zeller yells after me.

“Shut up, Zeller.” Price hisses and Zeller cackles. I ignore them and really don’t need or want to know what's in that drawer.

With the box on the desk, I open the top drawer. There are some of my files, a half empty bottle of aspirin, and other odds and ends. On top of it all a sticky note. I pick it up.

Will, I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.

- Zeller

I look up and out the large window back into the lab. Zeller is looking back. I give him a nod. He nods back and looks away.

I don't blame him. Don't blame any of them for thinking I killed Jack at first. It didn't look good. Half crazed as I was. Dissociated out of my mind. I didn't know where I had been for most of a day. They found me there, in his blood. Scalpel in hand, trying to cut him down.

The ripper never leaves any evidence.

It was just me all over that scene.

I don't blame Zeller at all.

"Hey."

"Hey, guys. Beverly"

Some people have entered the lab. I step aside so I can't be seen from the dividing window.

"So has Jack's whore come to get his crap yet?" That sounds like Noble. It's probably Montgomery with him then. I get back to packing from my hidden corner.

"Don't fucking call him that." Beverly snaps at them.

"Why? Jack ain't around to yell at us anymore." Yup, that's Montgomery.

"Yeah, he nobody around here now. The only thing that makes me sad about him leaving now is that we won't get to watch him lose it again during his suppression withdrawal." Noble's loud. Brave because he knows there won't be any repercussions anymore.

"You guys are disgusting." Beverly says. She sounds truly pissed now. "How do you even know he's on suppressants anyway."

"He never took heat leave." Noble says. It makes my stomach churn to know he was paying attention to that.

"God, I bet he'd smell amazing." Montgomery adds. They *are* disgusting.

"You know it. He never bothered to wear scent blockers. Walking around here, flaunting himself." Ladies and Gentlemen, the FBI's finest.

"Scent blockers are really unhealthy. It's not his responsibility you don't know how to be around omegas." Bless Beverly. She gets as much shit as I do, as a beta woman here, but she always sticks up for me or anyone else in our positions here.

They ignore her. "We could always pay him a visit in his classroom. He's always hanging around there late." That finally has me worried.

"Oh yeah because the last time you tried your luck with Graham that went so well for you." Price mocks.

"I don't know. Price. The crooked nose really completes his very punchable face." Zeller piles on. That does make me smirk. It did feel good to break his nose.

“He doesn’t have Daddy Crawford to protect him if he tries that again.” Noble snarls back.

“You’re right. He’s got nothing to lose now. We’d never find your body.” Beverly remarks offhandedly.

“Not that any of us would look that hard for either of you anyways.” Price finishes. Seems like they have fully joined Beverly’s 'defend Will Graham' team. I appreciate it. Those pricks are right though, Jack isn’t around anymore. The special status and immunity that shielded me from the worst of the sexist barrage is gone.

Before Montgomery or Noble’s brains chug their way to a response, I walk out. Pushing the door open with my food, a little bit more dramatically than strictly needed.

They pale. Cowards. But I’m not naive enough to miss that alphas with wounded fragile egos are still dangerous. That threat earlier was real.

I stare them down. My expression, blank and menacing, one of Hannibal’s actually. I only saw it once.

I pass them and as I’m almost at the door Bev calls after me. “I’ll meet you after your last class, ‘kay?” Her eyes, sharp, as they flick over to Noble and Montgomery for a second and back to me.

I let my face go actually blank and just give her a nod, a subtle thank you. Then leave.

-

The constant beeping of my heart monitor was driving. Me. Crazy.

Being in bed all day. Every day. For over a week, was also driving me crazy. Not the fevered dissociated crazy of the encephalitis, that thankfully had mostly passed. No this was a ‘I going to kill the next person who asks me how I’m doing’ kind of crazy.

Hannibal was sitting on the small sofa seat to my right, reading one of his pretentious books to me to help me pass the time. Also, because he likes to hear himself speak.
I begrudgingly admit that I liked hearing him speak too. If I had been in less of a shit mood, I’d have appreciated it more.

A doctor knocked and entered the room in one motion, not bothering to wait for a response. Hannibal paused his reading.

“How are you doing this evening?” he said, eyes glued to the clipboard in his hands. Yup, murder was on my mind. I didn’t bother responding. Flashes of how all the killers in my head would have murdered this doctor flickered through my mind, like an old projector. The Chesapeake Ripper’s flare seemed appealing.

He pulled out a vile and syringe and went up to my IV drip. Drew out some of the yellowish liquid from the dark glass bottle.

“Excuse me. What are you administering?” Hannibal asked and stood up. Calmly walked over to my side.

I tuned out, preparing for the doctor talk to ping pong over me. So, I didn't pay attention to what the doctor said. Hannibal surprised me back to focus though.

“No, you are not.” He said, cold.

“Excuse me?” The doctor looked baffled. The slackness of his face took a beat to turn to indignation.

“Hand me that chart, please.” Hannibal said. It was an order.
The doctor balked. Hannibal was out of patience. Nothing had changed about him, but I could feel it. “The clipboard, Dr Jacobs.” He put his hand out. Expectant. Certain.

The clipboard got passed over. I’m pretty sure he wasn’t technically allowed to do that.

Hannibal took his time reading it over. And longer still to let the man squirm. It was amusing, even though I didn't know what was going on.

Hannibal slowly walked around my bed and up to the doctor. Looming over him. “Dr Jacobs, to err is human. However, when a medical doctor, your mistakes can be fatal. I would suggest, for the benefit of all the patients in your care, you find a way to excise that part of your humanity.” His expression was truly chilling. I’ve always admired how much Hannibal can express with barely any actual expression. “You have the wrong room.” He hands the clipboard back.

In that moment, the good Docter Lector looked truly dangerous. I was enthralled.

Hannibal

Hannibal

An unexpected opportunity. One that had Hannibal smiling genuinely as he mingled with the crowd of socialites and important people attending the opera that night.

Hannibal had spotted Jack Crawford, and more importantly, his husband. Will Graham, who has been crawling all over Hannibal's brain for unknown reasons.

He had done some light stalking a few months back. Determining if killing off the omega was a viable option to rid him of the nuisance he's been saddled with since that singular dinner. However, the more he found out about Will the more his interest grew. The more he thought about him. The more it disrupted his usual peace of mind. Contrastingly, the more he saw, the less he minded.

He didn't want to kill Will Graham.

His unexpected appearance at the opera intrigued Hannibal. It didn't fit with all he learned about the man. Reclusive by nature, brash and unpolished. High society was not his realm, and he had no issue denying them his presence. So why was he here now?

Hannibal worked his way through the room. Doing the dance of pleasantries and playful banter where appropriate to not seem like he was aiming right for Will. Will, who seemed to be hanging on Jack's arm, doing his best to participate with grace in the conversation that surrounded him. For all the world the pretty omega bride to Jack's powerful alpha position.

And pretty he was. Hannibal admired the finely tailored suit. The subtle matching they had going on at their wedding dinner is still a present theme but done with far more obvious intention now. Jack in steel grey, Will in a softer pearl grey, both with black accents. He also noticed his clean-shaven skin. He looked so young. Too young.

Hannibal carefully positioned himself with his back to Jack and a group down. He had to make dreadful conversation with Harrison Flint, some pedantic hedge fund manager.

It didn't take long though. Hannibal knew he stood out, even in this room.

"Hannibal." Jack gets his attention. Hannibal turns with the perfect expression of polite delight at running into an old friend. "I should have known you'd be here." Jack said happily. He seemed to be enjoying his night.

"Jack. So good to see you making time for the arts." They shook hands "We all worry you work too hard." The people Jack was talking to laugh and made some inane comments in agreement.

"Will, you remember Hannibal, don't you?" Jack gracefully brought his husband into the conversion.

“Of course. It’s lovely to see you again Dr Lecter.” Will was all smiles and steady polite eye contact that night. In fact, he seemed totally different from the surly and almost skittish creature at Hannibal’s house two years ago.

“Call me Hannibal, please.” he said as he took Will’s offered hand. There was a sharpness to Will’s gaze that Hannibal recognized.

Will

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will

I wait for Beverly. I'm not exactly certain if she's coming to meet me after class or if she just said that to dispel the notion that I'm always alone after classes end. I doubt Noble and Montgomery would be stupid enough to try to show up tonight anyway.

I discard my glasses off to some corner of the desk and lean back in my chair. It creaks as it tries to lean back further than it is really meant to. There's a persistent aching in my shoulders. I try to roll them back to pop them. Only one does. It doesn't bring any real relief.

I'll give her an hour. If she doesn't show up by then I'll finish lesson planning at home. This place makes me feel heavy. I only used to plan here because I'd wait for Jack to be done to go home. There's no need for me to be here any longer than I have too anymore.

-

"What do you think of burgers?"

My head shoots up. Beverly's sauntering down the side aisle, her typical sharp almost lopsided smile on her face. I check my watch; she had fifteen minutes. I look around for where I left my glasses and put them back on.

I wasn't expecting dinner out of this. The idea does make me realize I am in fact kind of hungry. "Burgers sound good." I say in lieu of a greeting.

"Great, pack up then, I'm starving." She grabs my box and stares at me expectantly. I do as she says.

-

We take separate cars and end up at this little diner a town over. Her choice.

She's got this buzzing energy about her as we sit and look over the menu. She's leaking it all over me. My leg bounces under the table in time with hers. I watch as she picks at the corner of the worn laminated menu. I fidget with the edge of the disposable paper tablecloth. Its sharp waxed edge glides over the callus on my thumb without cutting. I kind of want it too though.

I wait 'til after the server comes and gets our orders. "What is it, Beverly? You're making me jittery."

She laughs. The relieved release kind of laugh and whatever has wound her up loosens a bit. The bouncing on her end slows, then stops as she gathers her thoughts. Then she sighs before speaking like I still might react unpredictably, “I just need you to know that we are friends.”

I blink at her.

“Like, actually friends. I don’t want you to disappear just because we won’t be working together anymore.” She’s leaning over her overly ice filled glass of coke, boring holes into me with her gaze. I’m looking back, not making eye contact, but looking at her as a whole.

“OK.” I say. Inadequately. She’s reaching out and I’m not really sure how to reach back in this moment.

“I want to hang out. I get you're not the let's all go out for drinks kind of person, but we can do other stuff. I want to meet your dogs. We could, I don’t know...watch a movie?” She wants to meet the dogs.

“Have you been fishing?” I blurt out.

“Fishing? No.” she says slowly, then her smile spreads across her serious face. “You want to take me fishing?”

“You’ll scare away all the fish, but sure. I want to take you fishing if you want to go.” I say, nonchalant, casual even. Nothing like how I feel. It could be nice. Me, Beverly and the dogs.

“Fuck yeah I do, and you’ll see, I won't scare away a single fish!” She says as she smacks her hands down on the table. Braced like we’re going to get up right and go fishing right now.

She will, in fact, scare away every fish, but that's ok.

“Alright then, we will plan a fishing trip.” I’m already flipping through my mental calendars. Comparing my bleakly emptied schedule to what I know of hers.

Our orders come and we dig in. She’s got worse table manners than I do. I’m glad Hannibal isn’t here to see us, but I’m also enjoying how easy it can be with Beverly. She’s so accepting and forthright.

She proves that when she gets her next big topic out. “So, how's your brain?” she shoots out once we’ve each taken a few bites of our burgers. Bacon for her. Mushroom for me.

“Right as rain.” I shoot right back. She won't accept that.

She doesn’t.

“Bullshit.” She points a french fry at me. “How’s your brain?”

That earns a smirk from me. “No longer burning or flitting in out of a dissociative fugue.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “What about the hallucinations?”

Oh, she's sharp as a tack. "I know what's real and what isn't now." I admit.

"Do the docs think those will go away?" She goes back to eating now that she has me talking.

"Don't know. Honestly, I haven't mentioned it." I didn't see the point. I know the answer.

"Don't you think you should?" she says, more casually than she feels if the pause she took means anything.

I shrug. "They were there before." I eat three fries in one go. Then add, "Hannibal knows."

She relaxes at that. "So, you're going to keep seeing him?" She tries not to sound too approving of that idea. Knowing me well enough to bristle still at the idea of having a psychiatrist.

"We've seen each other a few times since I got out of the hospital." I didn't notice the slip, but she did.

"Seen... each other?" Her eyebrow shoots up. Oh.

I try to sound nonchalant, "Yeah, he's come by my house a few times."

Her jaw literally drops. "I wasn't allowed to help you move but you've been having tea parties with Dr. Lector?" she throws a fry at me. "I can't believe you invited your shrink over before me!" She whisper yells. She dips the next french fry in an unhealthy amount of ketchup and pretends to throw that one at me too.

I duck away laughing. "He was making me food! How can I say no to that?"

"He made you food. Multiple times?" That eyebrow is back up. She looks like she does when she just found a new bit of evidence that clicks things into place.

"Yeah," I rake my fingers through my hair. "He prepped stuff and would bring it over. Said I should be resting. I guess he wanted to help out." I don't bring up me panic calling him. That's just too embarrassing. And just too private.

"Hmm," she says around the overly coated fry she popped into her mouth. "So, you're not his patient anymore?"

"I never was."

"You know what I mean. Sounds like you guys are past that kind of relationship. You two always seemed kind of... close." She says like the word close wasn't right, but the best fit she could think of. I can't really think of one that would fit either. There's an undercurrent to her words. An undercurrent I do not address.

I try to think back to the times we were all together to see how she got that impression though. I didn't think Hannibal and I acted like anything really. "I guess, he's my friend." It seems a trivial word to describe Hannibal.

She doesn't respond at first. Just looks at me, like she trying to make sure she's reading me right. "Good." She nods. "I was worried you were alone those weeks. Alana said she saw you, but just that once."

"Alana, huh?" She blushes slightly. Oh, I was going to tease her about talking about me behind my back, but that's interesting.

"I mean Dr Bloom. Y'know, I was worried about you. I didn't know if you'd appreciate me calling or dropping in on you. I get that you need your space too." She's talking to her food.

"I'd appreciate it. Just text me before. Knowing ahead of time... helps." I say and her eyes flick up to me and nods. I grin back at her "So, have you asked her out?"

Beverly groans. "No." head in her hands.

"Why not?" They are an interesting match if it happens. Now that I'm thinking about it, possibly a good one.

"Have you looked at her?" she says like she hasn't seen herself.

"Oh yeah, I have."

She uncovers her eyes to look at me, surprised. "I didn't know you like women too."

I shrug again, "Don't really have a preference either way. People are just people to me. Alana though, she's a good one. You should go for it."

Her attention, temporarily intrigued about my sexuality, is reverted easily back to Alana. "She's kind of amazing." I laugh at her starry eyes and almost comically dreamy tone. She's got it bad.

-

"Let's address the elephant in the room." I project my voice, clear and steady, to reach over the murmuring all over the lecture hall. My professor voice. It's the first class of my second day back at work and as the students hush to pay attention, I click to the first slide in my presentation for today.

A picture of Jack dominates the screen. It's his professional head shot. I don't look at it.

"You've all heard of Agent Crawford's passing. I understand some of you may feel the urge to express your condolences to me. Don't. For those of you who wish for some form of social mourning practice, you may take part in a moment of silence now." Yesterday there was a never-ending stream of students coming up to me before and after class to tell me how sorry they are for my loss. It seems being widowed by The Guru trumps their usual fear of talking to me.

One. Two. Three. They all fall silent. Some bow their heads, some watch me. I adjust my glasses and don't watch them back.

Ten. Eleven. Twelve. I fuss with my papers needlessly. Filling this time and trying to ignore the heavy pall that's growing in the room.

Thirty-four. Thirty-five. Thirty-six. Jack's eyes feel like they are burning hot into my back. I could always feel it when he watched me.

Forty. Forty-one. Forty-two. I take a few slow deep breaths. Try to shake off the feeling.

Fifty-one. Fifty-two. Fifty-three. I pick up the clicker. Ready to switch slides and move on.

Fifty-five. I turn. Fifty-six...

Jack's face is bloody, upside down, and purpling form the blood pooling. I didn't put that photo up. It feels like my heart is trying to pound its way out of my chest and I stare.

The timer goes off.

I click to the next slide.

For a horrible moment, it feels like it won't switch. My throat goes dry. I'm sure it's just a split second, no longer than it normally takes. And it does switch over.

I snatch my water bottle up and down half of it.

"Alright." My voice is a bit rough. That's ok. They can think it's because of the grief. "Let's get into it. Dr Bloom gave you all three case files to compare. Let's go over their similarities."

-

The slide worked. Not one student came, somber faced, to hover by my desk after class. I'm not sure if this was any better though. I can't be so caught off guard by the hallucinations here.

Maybe it was just seeing his face here. In the same room, he hunted me down in all those years ago and asked to borrow my imagination. I'll be prepared next class. Just one more for today.

I put my head down on the desk. The cool varnished wood feels good against my forehead. I need to get my shit together.

That day though, the day we started working together, is playing around me. Like Jack isn't the only one dead and haunting the place now. Not being able to see the room doesn't stop that moment from playing out and my memory fills in the rest.

That day changed everything.

My heart hurts.

He never did anything half assed and that day he was on a mission. It was interesting watching him switch tactics to see what worked on me. First coming in with friendly professional banter. “We had a disagreement when we opened up the museum.”

I was on guard immediately. Nobody liked some upstart omega questioning their judgment, especially not an alpha with status. His jovial tone was suspicious. So, I was snarky to try to whittle down the veneer he was putting on. “I disagreed with what you named it.” I did nothing to disguise the distaste I felt.

“The Evil Minds Research Museum.” He said as he kept moving to keep himself as much in my line of sight as possible. Of course, I wasn’t looking at him. Busied with packing away my things. A clear enough indicator to him that I had no intention of this conversation lasting long.

“A little hammy, Jack” Maybe an outright insult would end this, I had hoped.

He just switched gears. If I was going to be direct and confrontive. So could he. “So you’ve hitched your horse to a teaching post.” And then he leaned on the podium to get into my space. He continued “And I also understand it's difficult for you to be social?”

I couldn’t help but mirror him a bit, leaning into the podium too. Defensive masking, but it did nothing to make me be able to maintain the eye contact I could feel he was so determined to gain.

“I’m just talking at them; I’m not listening to them. It’s not social.”

A pause fell over us when he didn’t immediately continue the conversation and a tension built. One I didn't expect.

I was so uncomfortable; he was so in my space. Pushing past every boundary or block I put up. And yet...

He leaned in, “May I?” hand already near my face, asking without really giving me an option, and pushed up my glasses. Forcing the eye contact I was denying him.

There was no leer, no actual come on about it. His expression was open. He just wanted me to look at him, so he made me. It was kind of a little hot. I hated it.

“Where do you fall on the spectrum?” he asked, not unkindly while he held my gaze.

So, I answered. “My horse is hitched to a post closer to autistics than narcissists or sociopaths.” Ok, it was still a bit of a non-answer. I was diagnosed in childhood. I am autistic. But fuck him. He already knew that. He was just asking to confirm I wasn’t also the kind of crazy he’d put in his Evil Minds Museum.

“But you can empathize with narcissists and sociopaths?” Finally getting to his point in being here. I wanted to be gone.

“I can empathize with anybody. It's less to do with a personality disorder than an active imagination.” I started packing up my shit again.

He leaned over my damn podium again and this time stilled my hands with his before asking "Can I borrow your imagination?" And that had me. In that moment I realized what he was offering, and I wanted it. It was my way in. That moment defined our whole dynamic.

The sexual attraction didn't hurt either. However, he never used that as a way to convince me. It was just there. I think it surprised him as much as me.

-

The last class does go better. Jack's photo doesn't change and it's just as effective at keeping the students away from me.

I go behind the projector screen to pack away the files in the cabinets nestled there.

Heavy footsteps become louder as they approach from the hall.

Jack.

I catch myself before following the automatic response to go out to greet him and my stomach drops. The footsteps don't even sound like his anymore. I rub at my eyes.

"I think I left it in here." someone says. Entering the lecture hall again.

I still. Not wanting to draw attention even though I'm still hidden behind the large projector screen.

Jack is dead.

My sinuses get that annoying tingling feeling.

"Found it. Thank God. I can't afford to lose my phone again." the student says.

"Hey, isn't this Professor Graham's room. Is he back?" their companion asks. Great. I don't want to hear this. I close my eyes. I contemplate blocking my ears, but that feels too juvenile.

"Yeah. Just had class with him. You should have seen him. His alpha just died, and he was so robotic about it." I sigh. You would think that a bunch of people studying to become profilers would have a more nuanced understanding of how people can express grief.

"He's a freak." There it is. "People say he was only with Crawford to be able to be in the field." That hurts. Not because I haven't heard it before, far from it. Not because they are missing the point of why that would be necessary in the fucked up sexist system we live in, in the first place. It hurts because it's still kind of true. I wouldn't have had those opportunities without Jack, and I wouldn't have married Jack if it weren't for the doors he was able to open for me.

"Stone cold bitch." one of them remarks.

They leave. I simultaneously feel like shit and pissed that they would dare judge us, our relationship, and boil it down to something that simple. It wasn't that simple.

I shut the cabinet doors. More like slam them. One bounces back and I have to focus to close it with more restraint this time. People need to mind their own damn business.

I return to the desk and pack up for the day. Thank god I don't have to come back here tomorrow. I need to be away from this fucking place. I guess that's the benefit of only teaching here now. I only have to come in Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays.

-

Thursday is worse. I feel crazy. I hear him. I think I catch glimpses of him around corners or in crowds. Memories of Jack are everywhere. Nowhere feels safe.

Last class, Jack was just there leaning on the side wall by the entry way, watching me lecture, just like he used to. His expression stern but couldn't cover that proud twinkle in his eye that would just light me up. I don't feel worthy of that look anymore.

I needed to get out of there.

"Would you like any cream or sugar with that?" The cashier asks me.

"No thanks." I pay and move over to wait for my coffee.

I still have two hours before my next class. I go collect a to-go cover and a napkin.

"Graham" one of the servers yells.

"Thanks." I pick up my coffee and bagel. And just start walking.

Before, if I wasn't in my classroom, I was in the lab or Jack's office. I never really explored this place much. But I can't sit alone in that room anymore and I can't go to the lab.

The halls are wide and busy in the academic buildings. The library would be the same, but at least quiet.

My feet still take me to the BAU building.

Automatically, I walk up to the security point and scan my card. I know it won't work anymore.

The light flashes green. The glass doors slide apart and grant me access.

Weird. They haven't revoked my access permissions yet. I take a quick look around. No one seems to notice anything amiss. So, I pass through.

I don't know why I'm here. If the lecture hall is haunted by Jack this place will be worse.

The cool stone floor makes every step echo. A second set of steps join with mine, heavier, steadier and on my heels. Jack would always walk slightly behind me. His presence feels warm at my back.

If I looked over my shoulder the feeling would be dispelled. I don't look. Just keep walking. The sensation of Jack's habitual guiding touches makes me shiver. It dawns on me just then how aimless I've been feeling without Jack perpetually pointing me in the direction he wants me to go. Both literally and figuratively.

I want to lean into him. But he's not actually there to lean on anymore.

His hand on my waist. Left.

Press to my spine. Forward.

"Here." His voice is a cool whisper in my ear. Goosebumps raise all down my neck, back, and arms.

I open the door on my right. It's nondescript. Same as the rest in the empty hall.

"Lock it." He sounds more real now and in the far end of the little room.

I do as he says. The key is already in the door. As I turn it, the lock makes an unusual grinding noise, and a memory hits me like a battering ram.

"Jack, are you OK? What's the matter?" I said, locking the door like he said to. I had hurried over, abandoning my laptop and everything at my desk when I got a text from him:

I need you. Room B659

I thought the worst. His cancer diagnosis was such a fresh wound in our lives. I was on constant high alert. Lung cancer, just like Bella. The news was really affecting him even if he tried not to show it.

"Come here." His voice was rough. He was sitting behind a plain desk. Elbows braced on the table and his face in his hands.

"Jack?" I walked over and put my hand on his shoulder tentatively. The moment I touched him he grabbed me. One arm around my hips. The other hand yanking up my shirt as he buried his face into my abdomen, inhaling deeply.

"Jack!" I tried to stop the hand in my shirt. "What are you doing?!" I hissed at him. Not wanting to attract any attention from outside the room.

"I need you Will." Oh...the realization stalls my resistance for a moment and he gets my shirt untucked and his broad warm hand on my skin. That kind of need.

"Jack, we can't. Not here. What's gotten into you?" I kneeled down so we were eye level and he pulled me in for a kiss. The scent of him hit me full force then. He was in rut.

“Thought I had more time.” he says against my mouth. “Thought I could finish the day.” tingles rushed through me as he bit my lower lip and trailed nips down and across my neck.

I clutched to him. We had never spent a rut or heat together since we were always on suppressants. Kids never being something either of us wanted. More importantly, neither of us wanted to take that regular time off work.

I was far more affected by Jack in this state than I’d ever have expected or experienced. I groan as he unbuttons my shirt and pulls my collar aside to suck a bruise into the base of my neck.

It appeared waning off his suppressants to start chemo wasn’t going as smoothly as he was saying. I tried to think. Think through the fog of arousal Jack seemed determined to sink me in. My head was blurry and hurting before this. I needed to get some space from his hands and his mouth on me so I could think.

“Damn it Jack. We can’t here.” I pushed him away at the shoulders and he literally growled at me. The whole situation was so ridiculous. The head of the BAU, Special Agent Jack Crawford, The Guru, hiding in an abandoned overflow office trying to fuck his social pariah of a spouse during work. Like a shitty drama show.

I couldn’t help but laugh. It pissed him off. He grabbed me by my hair and brought us back into a rough kiss.

I’m losing this fight. My hands were on the back of his neck and gliding over his short hair. I still try to convince him in between kisses “The car. Jack”

“No”

“I drive. We need to go home.”

“No”

“You can fuck me then.” Please, fuck me, god. I’m wet.

He just growled at me again and started to unbuckle my belt. He had me half hard already.

I was nervous laughing. Part of me wasn’t just responding to him, but the thrill. The idea of actually fucking right there, right then. *At work.*

“You’re not going out there. Too many people. Too many men. Alphas. No.” It was an order. Nonnegotiable. No room to argue. I knew that tone well.

I relaxed. Freed from having to manage the situation. Make the right choices. To do the right thing. Just knowing what's was coming next has me achingly hard.

I stopped resisting all together and started on his belt too.

“Jack.” I gasped. His hand felt scorching as he reached into my pants and took hold of me.

I sink into the chair he was sitting in that day over a year ago. It feels so wrong that it's cold, when the memory of how his hot skin felt against my hands, against my body, and inside me is so present in this room. Like the walls remember the pants and moans, but the fabric forgot the heat.

I brace my elbows on the table and bury my face in my hands. My chest feels tight up to my throat and the tears feel like acid on my skin as they escape me. I am simply overwhelmed by the missing him that's in me. That I can't run from because he's everywhere and nowhere.

I thought not being in our house would be enough. But our relationship was here more than anywhere. This place was the pillars that held our marriage up.

I weep until my thirty minute warning alarm reminds me of class. Then I pick myself up. Wash my face in the nearest bathroom and get this day over with. Get this whole week over with.

-

Friday comes and goes with little relief. I'm preoccupied. I find myself zoning out into memories. Struggling with what if scenarios. So when my alarm saturday morning wakes me I get up to feed the dogs, prop open all the doors so they can come and go as they please and drop right back into bed.

Thats where I stay. Lying in bed next to a pile of pillows because sleeping alone feels wrong and I miss Jack being there. Always there. Even when I hated him. Even when he was cruel. We'd go to bed and for a little while, put everything aside.

I'm grieving. I understand the psychological process of grief. This isn't even my first dealings with it. I don't know why I'm still so taken off guard by just how much it hurts.

Part of me feels like it shouldn't. We weren't in love. Not for real. Shouldn't that spare me some of this?

I turn over, restless in bed. I face the pathetic imitation of companionship I've constructed out of cotton, polyester and down feathers. I push and kick them all off the bed. I feel cried out so there's no place for these feelings to go anymore. It just makes me angry. It simmers just under my skin.

There's no place for that to go either. So, I just fume in bed. The bed I've been in all day. I'm not even sure what time it is. I'm not hungry yet, but that's not a safe indicator of time passing. It looks like later afternoon by the light coming from outside.

I contemplate getting up. Being an adult and feeding myself. I don't move.

-

My phone rings and brings me back to reality. To the empty room. The empty bed.

The light is orange with sunset. Shit. I haul myself out of bed. Everything hurts and my muscles scream at me for being used for the first time in hours. I need to feed the dogs.

I ignore the phone and go to the side entrance and whistle loudly out the door. I can hear excited barking in the distance as the dogs run back to the house for dinner. I get to work filling their bowls.

The phone continues to ring from the bed.

They storm in. Practically falling over each other to get to their bowls. I wish I could be that enthusiastic about anything. I don't even notice the phone's gone silent in the background as I watch them, tails wagging, as they chow down their kibble. I guess I should eat too. I don't want to.

I make my way to the kitchen anyways. I turn on the kettle for some tea and snatch a banana from the fruit bowl on the table. I force myself to eat it while the water boils. It sits like led in my stomach, but it's better than the hunger migraine I can feel looming.

The kettle screams. The smell of earl grey tea blooms out as I pour boiling water over the teabag. It soothes some of my raw nerves. Something about the bergamot in it always wraps around me and sits warm in my chest.

I head back to bed, now armed with tea and the aim to at least read, instead of wallow.

As I collect the pillows from the floor and arrange them so I can sit up, I find my phone in the sheets.

1 missed call – Hannibal

I bite my lip, feeling guilty for ignoring him. I don't feel like talking, but...

I settle into bed and stare at the screen. He called eight minutes ago.

Nine, now.

I hit call back and take a sip of tea waiting for him to pick up.

He does, almost immediately. "Good evening, Will." His says and the tea spreads warmth through me.

"Hey, sorry I missed your call. I was-" Doing jack shit "feeding the dogs." I say, probably unconvincingly even though it's true.

"Thats quite alright. Is everything ok?" Yeah, that wasn't going to go unnoticed by a deaf and blind mole, let alone Hannibal.

I sigh, "Just a tough week. It's fine."

"I imagine being back at work presented several difficulties for you." He pauses, waiting to see if I'll volunteer anything. I don't even know where to start.

"Was it the hostile social environment or being back in Jack's world without him that has you sounding so somber?" He's in therapy mode. I don't want to do this. Not now. Not on the

phone. Not after sitting in those feelings all day. All week. I just want a break.

“Hannibal...” I cut myself off. It almost feels rude to not answer. To say I don’t want to talk about it. He’s only trying to help.

“I understand.” He says and he does. He always does. “Would you like to go on that picnic we talk about tomorrow?”

And just like that he has me feeling... not good but better. Better enough that I feel guilty about it. Which is a confusing mix. But it's still better enough that I’m just relieved.

“Please.” I say with a desperate choked laugh bubbling up in my throat.

Chapter End Notes

Hi y'all,
I wanna say thanks to everyone checking this fic out, leaving kudos and commenting. I really appreciate it!
Just to let you know, I've caught up to what I had prewritten, so I'll be slower at posting now. I'm aiming for a set of chapters a week, but I'm also a teacher so sometimes I'm just exhausted.

I love reading the comments though and they are super motivating to keep the tempo up, so please, feel free to let me know what you think!

Hannibal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal

Hannibal stood at the info boards, feigning more interest than he felt in the abductions of the young girls, instead of focusing on his true reason for being in Jack's office. Will. Who was sitting, sullenly by Jack's desk.

"Tell me then, how many confessions?" He asked, playing his role as an extra psychological consultant for the case.

"Twelve dozen last time I checked." Jack was evident in his exasperation at all the people wasting their time. "None of them had any details."

He walked back over to his desk to sit down like a man sitting at his throne, "Until this morning and they all had details. Some genius in Duluth P.D. took a photograph of Elise Nichols' body, shared it with his friends then Freddie Lounds posted it on tattlecrime.com."

"Tasteless." Will sneers. Engaged in the discussion for the first time, quiet like he was just saying it to himself more than to the other men in the room.

Hannibal wondered if his silence was a protest at Hannibal being brought in in addition to Will's considerable abilities or just a natural reaction to an unfamiliar acquaintance in what he considered his space.

Not one to let an opportunity pass him by, "Do you have trouble with taste?" Hannibal made sure his tone betrayed nothing but casual curiosity.

Will looked momentarily surprised to be acknowledged and his comment engaged with. "My thoughts are often not tasty." he shares somewhat reluctantly.

"Nor mine." Hannibal said truthfully, but also to relate. Start the association of similarities in Will's mind. "No effective barriers." Hannibal moves slowly back across the room towards Will.

"I built forts." Will flippantly shot back and took a sip of his coffee.

"Associations come quickly." He takes a seat in the chair next to Will, across from Jack. Who is watching the interactions. This is what he wanted, for Hannibal to come in and slyly observe Will. Assess his stability.

"So do forts." Will was clipped and obviously done with this line of conversation. His eyes flick ever so briefly towards Hannibal as he settles in the chair close by but darks back around avoiding the eyes that were trained on him.

As the years passed Hannibal did not keep up a consistent effort to stalk Will. He paid attention just enough to know what he wanted. He saw glimpses of the versions of Will that Will put out into the world. This was his first chance to see Will in an investigation, however. An aspect of the man that intrigued Hannibal the most and only got snippets from Jack's lamentations of Will's more recent displays of instability and cracking control.

Jack got up to give them some space, leaving his chair slowly spinning as he busied himself at the info board.

"Not fond of eye contact, are you?" Hannibal decided to see what Will would do when directly called out.

Will sighed and started off with a genuine tone, "Eyes are distracting. See too much, don't see enough." He got a little sing-songy and to Hannibal's delight, Will went on with some real cheek while making direct and deliberate eye contact, a challenge even. "And it's hard to focus when you're thinking 'oh those whites are really white.' or 'He must have hepatitis.' or 'Is that a burst vein?'" He pauses for dramatic effect, glaring into Hannibal's eyes. Hannibal stared back coming to a realization that made him laugh. He stifled it down to a bare chuckle. "So yeah, I avoid eyes whenever possible." Turning and dismissing Hannibal entirely "Jack?" Will calls.

Hannibal won't be dismissed however and with an intense need for Will to know that Hannibal *sees him,* Hannibal challenges back, "I imagine what you see and learn touches everything else in your mind." Will reluctantly looks back at him, stoney faced. "Your values and decency are present, yet shocked at your associations. Appalled at your dreams. No forts in the bone arena of your skill for the things you love."

Will looked shaken and angry, "Who's profile are you working on?" He turns to Jack, outright mad then, "Who's profile is he working on?" clearly feeling caged in and infrindged.

Jack leveled him a flat stare, not coming to Will's aid. Will stared back at Jack, hurt at the abandonment tightening the skin around his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Will. Observing is what we do. I can't shut mine off any more than you can shut yours off." Hannibal reaches over to grab and drink some of his own coffee. Long gone cool, but drinks in the name of returning some air of casualness about him. He got too intense. Let his true intentions leak out just a bit and Will did not receive them well.

Hannibal was not discouraged, however. More calm and sure of himself than ever, because now he knew why Will Graham had stuck to his mind with such persistence. Independent of Hannibal's own desires and control, carving an important space into Hannibal's mind palace all his own. Why Hannibal feels that ever-growing obsession with this omega who can see anyone. Empathize with even the darkest of god's creations.

The remarkable process that inextricably links two minds and souls together had started long ago. Likely the first time they met. Pulling Hannibal into Will. And unbeknownst to him yet, pulling Will to Hannibal.

Will is Hannibal’s mate.

Hannibal never thought a mate was in the cards for him. Being such a singular person, always on the outskirts of most typical human reactions and relationships. Always having to feign the connections he made with people. He figured that a mate bond, the rarest and most intense of human connections would pass him by like all the rest.

But this omega in front of him, with empathy unparallel, and a darkness of his own he has coiled and strangled for so long, is Hannibal’s. Will just didn't know it yet.

Chapter End Notes

Will's chapter is coming in a day or two. Just got to edit it!

Will

Chapter Notes

Hi y'all

Sorry for the delay. My life exploded a bit since I posted Hannibal's chapter.
Writing this fic has been such a comfort in the chaos and I really appreciate all of you reading.
I hope you enjoy this new chapter and share your thoughts.
<3

Will

I slept like shit. Or more like I didn't sleep so I feel like shit. Like more shit. I feel like compounded shit, and I'm pissed about it. I want to look forward to Hannibal coming by, but the hollow aching for Jack has officially taken up residence in my core. It's at an odd war with the frankly giddy excitement I feel at the prospect of this picnic.

So, I tossed and turned all night. Sometimes awake taken away by memories of Jack. Sometimes caught up in imagining how today will go.

Having a vivid imagination can be good for some things. Like watching an overly idealized version of myself laying in the tall grass, for once breathing easy and just having a good damn time. Hannibal with that soft pleased smile that he sometimes directs my way. Leaning back on a tree, looking like the modern equivalent of the romantic hero in some nineteenth-century gothic novel.

It's silly and overly romantic, in the literary sense of course. But living in daydreams has always been my escape. Just usually it's me alone in the stream fishing.

It's far more pleasant than the memories. All the fights we had bounce around in my head. It feels wrong to still hold anger towards a dead man. It felt wrong to be angry with Jack when he was alive. It's hard to be angry with someone when you understand exactly why they do what they do. That never stopped us from fighting though.

-

"Your judgment is clouded, Will. You're not seeing things straight. Abigail Hobbs was involved!" Jack yelled at me; hands slammed down on the kitchen island between us simultaneously. The noise clashed and battered me inside my skull, burning away the last bit of patience I had been clinging to all day through the migraine.

“ *I’m* not thinking straight? I’m not the one dead set on ruining a young girl's life with no evidence.” I spat back, leaning forward, and got in his face as much as I could with the black marble spanning a gap between us. “You want your pound of flesh, but I won't let you crucify her, Jack.”

He rounded the island to me. Stalking. Looming. He always got big and loud as a means of intimidation. He’d forget I have far scarier monsters than him in my head.

“You’re such a stubborn *bitch* .” He snarled at me, inches away from my face. The insult caught me off guard. The hurt of it dissociated me enough to step back and look at him, properly. Process what I was feeling from him. Rage covering fear. Fear of his own failings.

He looked exhausted. He hadn’t been done with chemo for very long. The treatment had made him so sick, but stubborn as ever, he refused to stop working. He was exhausted and stressed from the taunting from the Chesapeake Ripper, and his already hot temper was all over the place, had been for months. I knew he was also struggling with the fact he beat the cancer and Bella couldn’t. Survivors guilt and grief all over again.

But *that* was new.

Just because I can empathize doesn’t mean I have to take it. I felt shaky, nauseated, and my head had been killing me all day. For many days actually. I lost count by then.

I grabbed his face in both my hands roughly and pulled him down to me. “Don’t fucking talk to me like that, Jack. Do you hear me?” I was mad. I get that shit everywhere else. Not in our fucking home. Not from him. All the violent monsters in my head were clamoring for blood, his blood. Something must show in my eyes because he closes his.

“Will, I...” He cupped my face in return. Gentle, and brought our foreheads together. “I went too far.” His fingers wiped away a tear I didn’t even know I had shed. It’s as close to an apology I ever get from him. It’s not enough.

I hated being touched with gentleness and care while those thoughts infested my body. I felt so out of control. I had to stop his remorse; the sweet touches that were making me so confused. So, I yanked him the rest of the way down so our mouths crashed together.

That was usually how we resolved fights.

-

In the end, he was right. I shouldn't have snuck Abigail out and taken her back to the hunting cabin the next day... I don’t want to think about her. About finding out.

I just shouldn’t have left him. When I came back. Back to myself... he was dead. The Chesapeake Ripper had been taunting Jack relentlessly. He had been in our *home* . It was an obvious threat. I should have stayed.

I lay here, in my pit of guilt and memories when a rustle from outside finally gives me a reason to get out of bed. It's only the ass crack of dawn, but I know I’m not going to sleep

anymore. The few bouts of sleep I managed were tumultuous and dark.

The rustle turns to scratching and chittering. All the dogs are up and rush the front door, whining. I shoo them away. They always love messing with the raccoons. Lucy growls and tries to sneak between my legs as I open the door. She smacks her nose into the screen door like the dumbass she is.

“A raccoon could eat you alive, squirt.” I pick her up and toss her gently onto the sofa, then sneak out the screen door before she can dart back around. Her expression is one of pure tiny dog rage as the screen door closes back in her face. That brings a chuckle out of me. Having dogs is such a blessing. They can always make me feel a little better, even for just a moment.

You’d think with all the commotion just for me to get out of the house the raccoon would have scampered off by now, but I spot the critter with their head stuck in my plastic watering can. Poor thing. They bumble about and walk into the wall making an unhappy squeaking noise.

I watch for a moment thinking about what to do. I don’t really feel like risking rabies right now, but the only way to get their head unstuck is grabbing the little guy. So, I head back inside. Put on some heavy work gloves and my thickest weatherproof jacket, then grab a bunch of towels. I’m sure the raccoon could still bite through all of that if they really wanted to, but raccoons are smart, and this one doesn’t seem rabid. In my experience, they can mostly tell when you’re trying to help them.

Armed with my multilayered fabric armor, I get back to the porch. I don’t try to be quiet. This will go over better if I don’t sneak up on the critter.

The raccoon has scooted themself into a corner, half under the little table and chair I have out here. I kneel and coo, trying to make soothing sounds. They don’t seem too bothered by my presence or by being stuck in a watering can. Alright then.

I reach out quick and snag them in the towels. That gets them going. It’s no easy task swaddling a squirming raccoon, but the fact they can’t bite me right now helps and I managed to get all those little clawed hands and feet tucked into the towel. I grip my bundle in one arm against my chest and gently pull the can off their head.

They shake their ears and with big glossy eyes blink up at me. Far calmer now that they can see, the little guy whines and chitters at me. I’m already half in love.

“Aren’t you cute?” I have a brief thought and dismiss it. Raccoons aren’t pets. They would just run back to the forest at the first chance anyways. Looking down into those sweet eyes though, I decide I can at least feed them.

I carefully set the raccoon bundle onto the floor and let them escape the towels themself. The dogs have lost interest and have all gone back to napping in the living room. Except for Baxter, he's on the bed, pretending like I can’t see him in the blankets. I huff at him and ignore that for now. I take a clean food bowl and fill it with kibble, hoping my new friend will still be out there.

To my surprise, they are arm deep in the watering can again. What's in there that they want so bad?

To distract them I throw a few bits of kibble their way and trail the rest of my handful to the bowl I set by the stairs. Easy escape if they want and not too close to me. I take a seat in the chair and wait.

The raccoon is easily distracted and goes for the kibble with greedy little hands. I've always loved raccoons' little human hands. I've decided to name them Chester. I can't help myself. While Chester eats their fill, I slowly reach for the watering can and check inside.

It's a snail. All that trouble for this one little snail when there are tons out in the garden. I carefully slide it off the inner surface of the can and place the half translucent mollusk on my palm. It slowly moved from the center of my palm towards my fingers, leaving a strange red trail behind. Is that... blood?

Nothing hurts. The snail isn't damaging me, so it's not my blood. I look back in the can. Nothing, just a little leftover water. The trail of red glistens as the creature makes its way up my ring finger. That's when I hear a deep carrying cry from the forest. It's a long familiar sound and I scan in the dim dawn light for the raven stag.

The only reason I find it is because I am meant to. Its shadowy pelt merges with the dark forest shadow. Everything is backlit by the not yet risen sun. The stag's motion is the only thing making it visible in the silhouetted lighting, as it makes its way along the tree line.

It cries again and I feel it rattle my bones. I haven't seen the stag or that wendigo... man, *thing,* since the fever subsided. I expect the fear to creep over me like it always did with these hallucinations.

Nothing happens though. I sit and watch. Chester doesn't react at all, predictably. There's no ice in my bones. No pain in my head. No terror.

I check on the snail, it's coiled around my finger leaving a spiral of blood in its wake. This is...weird. Weird even for me. The stag calls again and I feel like I should go to it. It's changed course and is pacing over this way anyways.

It's not real, I might as well. I pull off the snail and leave it in the grass as I walk across the field to meet the stag. Its antlers are huge and gored. We watch each other steadily as we approach. I keep waiting for the fear to come. Some sense of ominous foreboding at least. It's dripping blood for fuck's sake. What's wrong with me?

I don't feel any aggression from it though. It stops a few yards away, waiting for me to finish closing the distance. To choose to close the distance.

I do. Hand reaching out. Its hot breath clouds the air even though it's already warm out this early in the morning.

My hand hovers, palm up, offering myself to its snout. It could bite me, easily, but somehow, I just know it won't. I feel like I'm feeling its intentions, but I can't read anything from the

creature’s body language or dark eyes.

It huffs harshly as it smells my hand and then we are connected. My skin erupts in goosebumps, and I’m filled with this sense of steady ruthless calm. Anchored to myself in a way I haven’t my whole life, with every other mind seeping into me all the time. It's peace.

My hand runs over its velvety nose, the blood across my palm smears against its short fur. It doesn’t seem to mind. I look up to take in its sharp antlers. The ends wet and shining in blood that just looks black in this light. Behind the stag, in the trees is the wendigo man. The same pull I felt taking me to the stag returns, but it wants me to go to him. *I* want to go to him.

“Will!” I swivel around. That’s Jack’s voice, coming from the house. It’s far in the distance. I didn’t realize just how far I walked. Of course, I don’t see him. He’s not there.

When I turn back, the stag and wendigo man are gone, but the echos of that feeling lingers and I long for it back. The contrast is horrible.

The sun crests over the tree line. I touch my forehead and cheeks. I don’t feel hot. Not even warm really. I head back home.

-

“Where the fuck is it?” I grumble to myself while standing precariously on a box looking in those stupid little upper closet sections with tiny doors. Dad’s room is a mess. I really need to do something about it.

I know the picnic basket is here somewhere.

For some reason, it's important to me that if we picnic, we do it properly. I want it with the cute basket and blanket. The whole deal. So, I’m climbing around this dusty mess because I *have* to find it. Dad started taking it with us when he was first teaching me to fish as a kid. I’d carry it while he carried all the actual fishing gear. It had gone with us ever since. It’s not one of the fancy ones with spots for plates and cutlery. No, it's just a simple basket with flip-flop lids and has a little side loop of wicker to hold flowers.

Well, I’m not really sure if that's what it's meant for... but it’s always what I used it for. When I'd get bored of fishing and dad would actually have to get down to it and catch us fish to eat for the week or we wouldn't have enough food, I’d go off. Roaming around finding whatever pretty flowers caught my eye and made a bouquet. Dad would always find something, even if it was just a cup, and set my flowers out wherever we were staying.

I miss having flowers.

I step off the box and shift it over a few feet to check in the next tiny little doors. And there it is. Dust covered and a little worse for wear seeing that it’s well used. But it’s still sound. I pull it out and give it a gentle shake. The dust plumes off it, spiraling in the air as it finds new places to settle.

A little wipe down and it will be as good as new.

I step down and look around for anything else I could need from up here. The painting of my mother catches my eye. The one Hannibal left standing on the desk nestled in the dormer window. Tingles slide down my shoulders and back as I remember him touching my cheek that day. My stomach clenches. He's going to be here soon.

I grab the painting too and head downstairs. I don't have one of my mother displayed.

-

I'm buzzing. Vibrating. The problem with getting up at four-thirty in the fucking morning is that noon is a whole seven and a half hours wait. I've cleaned the picnic basket *and* the house, found the red and white gingham blanket, hung up my mother's picture and it's only nine in the morning.

I have plenty of time to do something else. Something unrelated to preparing for Hannibal's visit, but I just can't. I don't have enough energy; I'm stuck in waiting mode.

I'm pacing aimlessly. Kitchen to living room and back. I've tried reading. Tried sitting down at my lure table. I keep just getting up moments later because I can't focus on other things. And If I'm still, my mind wanders back to Jack and the creeping cloying hand of grief wraps itself around my throat.

So, I'm pacing.

The frustration builds with each step because I know I can't pace for three hours. I will need to shower before Hannibal gets here. I'm dusty from Dad's room and sweaty and grimy from cleaning. Since it's in the spirit of preparing, I find I can do that. I climb the stairs two at a time.

I reach over the tub to open the dormer window it sits nestled in. This house is quite charming that way. The upstairs has lots of little cozy corners. It's nice to shower looking out at the expanse of nature outside and not worry about possible onlookers.

It always takes a while for the water to heat up, even in the summer. In the winter, I'm kind of lucky if the boiler can make the water actually warm. It needs to be updated, but that's expensive.

The realization crawls up the back of my skull, I don't really need to worry about that. Jack left me quite a bit of money and with selling the house and apartment... It doesn't feel like that money is really mine and I feel slimy for touching it. Even though, rationally, I know I shouldn't feel that way. It's far too easy slipping back to the mindset I was before Jack, poverty will do that. Even with Jack, and we didn't need to worry, it never felt real. It's surreal to think that I am technically comfortable, money wise, and it's *mine.*

I guess I should replace the boiler then. This opens so many different avenues for this house.

I leave the water to heat and start to strip. Tossing my dirty clothes in the hamper. I look in the mirror to see if my beard needs to be trimmed down yet. I hate shaving it clean off. I look

too young. But if it grows too long, I can't stand the feeling of it either and the way it makes me look is just wrong.

I grab my electric shaver, the guard I always use is already on it, so I start trimming it down. I suppose if I let it grow it would only help with the visual buffer I can sometimes manage. Life is easier when people mistake me for just some beta man. The more masculine I look the more that works on people, even if they know I'm an omega. It's funny how much people depend on visual cues for their weird social gender roles.

I've made plenty of concessions on my appearance for the sake of an effective mask, the sensory nightmare of a full beard is just too far for me.

I run a hand over my freshly shorn facial hair, enjoying the feel of it. It's just long enough to pass the scratchy stage and be soft.

I step back, the rest of me is...rangy. The encephalitis didn't just take a toll on my mental health and brain. All those missed meals and stress made me lose weight too. It makes me look more delicate than is safe to be at work. Deep down though, I feel like preening.

The mirror starts to fog over so I get into the shower. I start on my hair, soaping it up and scrubbing at my scalp. The sensation reminds me of Hannibal's hands in my hair the day of my meltdown and beginnings of arousal build low in my stomach. I guess it is almost time I should have been taking another pill. I'm always horniest on those last few days without much prompting.

A bit of anxiety rises, prickling at my skin, at the evidence of coming off the suppressants already showing up. Normally, I don't really think about sex much. I think I'm just far more reactive sexually than spontaneous. I wonder if that's going to change off the meds. I've been on them all my adult life.

I sigh and rinse out my hair. It has been a long time. Flashes of Jack fill my head and that feeling of warmth in me grows, but so does the tightness in my throat. Nope. Not going there.

I grab a washcloth and soap it up. My intentions are to be brisk as I wash myself, but regardless my body has other plans. Am I really that touch starved? Fine. Just don't think of him.

I discard the cloth to soak in the pooling water in the tub. I grab myself, heavy and half hard already and I can feel my breath deepen automatically. The last time Jack and I had sex spills into my mind, unwanted. His big hands in my hair, pressing me down into the bed as he loomed over me, fucking into me hard.

No.

I'm panting, but I still my hand. For fuck's sake. Anything else.

I try to clear my head. But I'm over tired from not sleeping, it's not easy. Flashes flicker through my head, regardless of where I try to direct my thoughts. This is why I should watch

porn. At least then I'd have other images in my head. Jack and I had been together for nearly a decade and it's not like I was popular before him.

The experiences I had before him weren't anything to jerk off to anyways.

My hand glides over my cock again, slowly for now. I just lean against the side wall and look out the window.

The light isn't the same. No shades over the window here to filter the light into a sunset yellow. But the position I'm in reminds me of when I stood like this, mirrored in the next room over. Hannibal's face comes to mind. His hand on my face. His hands in my hair. His hand, barely on my neck, feeling my pulse, he must have been, that night while he was saying goodbye.

The pleasure builds as my hand moves languidly. I'm scared to move faster. To follow these thoughts. It's not right. I keep my eyes open. I don't want to see what I'll see if I close them. So, I keep looking out. Out onto the field where I had imagined our picnic taking place.

I slip back into that daydream sleepily, but now his shirt is unbuttoned a little more than usual. I imagine the soft breeze bringing the scent of him and his aftershave to me and my arousal builds to a wonton aching inside me. I want to crawl into his lap and finish the job of unbuttoning his shirt. Seeing just how far that chest hair goes. Run my fingers through it.

I'm panting for real now. Hand moving in earnest. It's not the sensation I want, but it's something. Anything. I want to taste him. Know what that broad clever mouth feels like on mine. In my mind. Sitting in his lap, I can just lean down and kiss him, and he lets me.

That has me spilling over the edge. I cum over my hand and reality crashes back around me. The water feels too hot, I am dizzy.

I finish up my shower as quickly as possible, confused and feeling divorced from my own actions.

-

I had planned to do something with my hair. Sometimes when I actually needed to look nice, I'd brush it back and let it fall like that. But in my hurry to get out of the steamy heady air of the bathroom, I just left it to fall in its natural mop of curls.

I am sitting on my bed in a towel just processing.

I can't believe I jerked off to Hannibal. Not even to sex with Hannibal, just him. For fuck's sake I came to the idea of a kiss. Like a chaste teenager.

It *was* so weirdly innocent and at the same time, I feel sleazy for having done it. You don't masturbate to your friends. It's...rude.

I was putting in so much effort to not think of Jack, I never expected my mind to go there. Though when have I ever been able to control what my brain does, really?

I shake out my air drying curls. I mean, Hannibal is beautiful. I'm not blind. I just never considered him, anyone really, in that way because I was with Jack.

I flop backward onto my bed and groan. I'm technically single again. I didn't enjoy my first go around at singledom. Always having to assess peoples' intentions. Are they being friendly? Are they flirting? If they are flirting, do they mean it seriously? What do *I* even think of *them?* Ugh, I could ignore all that while married. Another aspect of social interaction I could just write right off.

I rub at my tired eyes. I'm just lonely. Hell, I made a pillow person to sleep with last night. I am absolutely lonely. That's the reason I latched onto Hannibal. He's peculiar and lovely to me. I like being around him. *And* he's handsome. Doesn't take much else for lonely dick brain to get excited about.

There's not much I can do about it now anyways. I need to get dressed.

That presents a whole new frustration. I don't have anything to wear. Jack wasn't really a picnic and tea party type of guy, not that I have any of the clothes I used for his events anymore anyways.

-

By eleven-forty, I am pacing again and passably presentable. I don't feel like I fit the vision of the picnic in my head. I don't even really know what I want to wear to begin with. Just something… nice.

In the end, I settled for cream chinos that sit sadly a little loose on me now, and a linen moss green button down. It's picnic-y. It's boring, but I guess that fits me in the end. I don't know why I even want to go fancier when I know I could never really match Hannibal. Better to stay in my lane. Blend into the grass.

The collar feels suffocating. I haven't even buttoned the first button, but I take down the second anyways. It's too hot.

I go around the house opening all the windows. Today is truly stifling. I run upstairs to put on extra deodorant. I think I'd let myself roast out to die in the sun if I smell bad around Hannibal, with his nose? God.

I'm generous with it. I know I'm being a bit paranoid, but really. I hesitated and skipped my aftershave earlier. He's made numerous remarks about how bad it is. So just deodorant it is.

I roll up my sleeves and head outside. At least outside there's a steady breeze, a hot breeze but moving air nonetheless.

The breeze passes through the thin linen of my shirt, and it billows a bit. I love linen for that, plus it feels great. It's too hot for an undershirt so the fabric just glides smoothly over my skin.

-

I pass the time by throwing balls for the dogs. It's like a conveyor belt of dogs bringing me balls and me throwing so they shoot off in turns.

I also spend that time building up the resolve to make the most of this. The excited nervous energy from earlier comes back and I mentally shove aside my weird feelings about the shower incident.

Harley doesn't wait for me to throw the ball in my hand when he sports Hannibal's car in the distance. He dashes off to chase the car back to the house.

I walk up too, standing by the side of the driveway to meet Hannibal as he gets out of the car. The man steps out in full coral summer suit. White shirt. No tie. It should be too bright, garish even, but the fabric has this tarnish to it that dulls the color just enough. He looks great.

I'm grinning. "Wow, look at you. You really came dressed the part." I knew he would.

He stands straight and pretends to dust off his jacket and button the button at his waist. His amused smile shines at me. "I'm happy you approve."

"Hard not to." Am I flirting? I'm being weird, I need to stop.

He looks so pleased though, and for the first time gives me a slow and full once over. Well, first time that wasn't to then tell me I look 'unwell'.

As his deliberate eyes take me in, I can feel myself flush. There's not much for him to appreciate back, but he's valiant in his efforts. "You look lovely, Will."

"Uh..." I don't know what do to with that. "Thanks. It's nothing. I don't have much for these types of things. Normally if I'm going out there it's to fish or run with the dogs. No need to dress nice for that." I cut off my own rambling. "Do you need help with the food?"

He's amused. I can tell, but he spares me. "Yes, please."

So I help him bring in the stuff. He brought his small cooler back and a tote bag with drinks. Well, I call it a tote bag, but it has real leather straps and nice brass hardware pinning them into place. I guess this is Hannibal's equivalent of a reusable shopping bag.

He spots the picnic baskets on the kitchen table and without a word starts unpacking the food into it. And I'm so pleased. I didn't know how I was going to ask him to use it.

With each neat wax paper wrapped package he pulls out he explains what it is to me.

Honestly, it sounds like it boils down to mini finger sandwiches and French pastries, way too much cheese and grapes for two people, and whine. Two different bottles of wine and a bottle of sparkling water.

"You do know this is a picnic just for the two of us, right? I didn't invite the queen of England." I tease as he tucks the edges of the blanket around the food and closes the basket. The drinks will stay in the fancy tote. They don't fit.

He shoots a flat look at me, but his crow's feet are out on full display. “I imagine we will be out there for longer than just lunch. We may get hungry again.”

I know exactly where to take him then. “If you’re willing to stay out a while, are you willing to walk a bit farther than just out into the fields?” I ask, hoping he’ll say yes. His nice shoes be damned.

He doesn’t even spare them a glance, “I’ll go where you take me.”

-

The walk is pleasant. It is not a difficult track, really. Before we set off, Hannibal handed me the basket and took the bag from me. His logic is I need to lead the way and manage the dogs and the glass is more likely to break. Really, I think it’s because the basket is lighter.

We are almost there when he finally asks, “Where are we going?” He still has his jacket on, not even looking a little glowy with sweat, while I’m already feeling my shirt start to stick to me in this heat.

“There's a stream real close. It’s got a nice little grassy bank and a huge willow tree for shade.”

“Do you fish there?” He’s trailing next to me, seeming content to just look around the forest. I spot a thicket of wild heather and pick a few, adding it to the other flowers I’ve gathered along the walk into the basket’s flower loop.

“No, not there. The river it connects to is better. This is just a pretty spot.” I’ve got to get my bearings for a moment. I think it's down the little path on our left. “Should be this way.” I can hear the water.

I pick up my pace, eager to get there now that I know it’s close. The dogs dart off ahead of me just as eager to start running around now that I’ve broken the leisurely pace.

I look back to check on Hannibal, forgetting he might not be down for running through the woods all of a sudden, but he's following easily. “Just over here.” I say over my shoulder and really take off.

We break through the clearing together. I’m a little winded, but he seems fine. I feel a little satisfaction that at the very least he is in fact slightly glowing now. The man is human after all.

He walks ahead of me and I watch him take in the spot. I realize I’m waiting for his approval. He breathes in deeply, eyes closed, hands loose at his sides. On his exhale he turns back to me with eyes just a little bit glassier than usual. “You did not do this place justice when you described it as ‘just a pretty spot.’”

I’ve got a big goofy grin on my face. I know it. I’m just happy he likes it. “Isn’t it?” I step into the space with him. It's not large. It feels close and secluded because the growth of the forest tucks in close on either side of the banks here. Leaving only a small patch of clear area

for grass to grow along with flowers and the willow tree standing proud and ancient. “I haven't been here in years.” It's just as beautiful.

The air is a little cooler because of the water and it’s filled with sounds. The sounds of the water, the breeze through the trees enclosing this little spot, the sound of so many birds, frogs, and cicadas. It would be noisy if it didn’t feel so harmonious.

“Come.” He says, hand extended towards me. I hand him the basket and in return, I get an amused smile. “Thank you.” He gets to setting out the blanket and food. Oh, maybe I should be doing that.

He’s quick and efficient though, and I feel dumb for just setting him to work like that, so I busy myself calling all the dogs and pulling out the bowl I packed in my small backpack. I fill it at the stream for them.

Then I busy myself with finding more flowers. There are some knapweeds, prairie violets, and daisies in a cluster near the trees. I pick a few of each, mindful to leave plenty behind for the health of the plants.

Hannibal looks wearily at the dogs as he starts unwrapping the food.

“Don’t worry, they know better than to steal food.” I reassure him. He’s set the picnic blanket right under the willow tree, which sways gracefully in the breeze.

“What if I have something to give to them?” He doesn't look at me, playing like it's no big deal. Maybe to him, it really isn’t.

“You brought something for my dogs?” My heart squeezes.

“Yes. Some lamb sausage.” He unwraps the brown waxed paper in his hands to reveal four links of dark sausage. They look handmade.

“Did you make my dogs sausage?” the squeezing feeling gets uncomfortable.

“Yes, I would not dare feed your beloved dogs mystery meat from some can.” He sounds disgusted even at the thought.

“Hey, I eat the mystery meat from a can. It's not so bad.” If I don’t make a joke, I think I might actually tear up.

His expression is flat out horrified in a very mild mannered Hannibal way and I laugh. “Go ahead. Spoil my dogs.” They’ve all noticed the sausage already and are staring at Hannibal from polite distances.

As soon as he beckons them over, they are all wagging butts and excited dancing paws for him.

I watch him. Sitting on the red gingham blanket with my picnic basket and the beautiful backdrop around him, feeding my dogs treats. It’s kind of more perfect than I imagined. I feel

like I’ll shatter the illusion if I joined, with all my broken edges and ghosts. I unclench my fist around the delicate flowers I’m holding.

But he calls me over with a simple. “Come, Will. Eat.” Like it's the most natural thing in the world that I sit there with him in that beautiful picture.

So, I do, and I eat, and I don't break anything.

Hannibal

Hannibal

Hannibal watched Will toss back two aspirins for the second time since they had been out investigating together. The day had been immensely enjoyable for him. For one, this being the first opportunity he had to spend any significant amount of time with Will, and two, he found it greatly amusing to watch how the FBI works from the inside.

Will swallowed the pills dry and got out of the car without a word Hannibal's way. He's been terse and strictly professional despite the moment they shared over breakfast. It's a bit of a back track but Hannibal didn't mind. He already knew he would have to work Will over slowly if the omega proved to be interesting enough. He wouldn't be so intrigued at the possibilities if Will was going to be easy.

He watched as Will strode towards the Hobbs' home, unusually confident in posture and assured in step, as he looked around, taking in the whole scene.

Hannibal joins him on the path up to the bland suburban house. The only thing interesting about it is the well cared for garden. It wasn't ornate but obviously treated with a respect for nature.

The front door of the quiet house pulled open to unleash gasping screams from, presumably, Mrs. Hobbs as she was tossed onto the patio floor like a bleeding sacrifice, her throat slashed wide open.

She would bleed out in under a minute. Hannibal knew this from the amount of blood already covering her and the rate at which she was bleeding. He was far more interested in Will's reaction than concerned for her. She was already dead for all intents and purposes.

Mrs. Hobbs had barely hit the floor and Will was already running to her. Garret Jacob Hobbs disappeared back inside.

From the walk up, Hannibal silently observed, standing back to watch the play unfold. Will was shaking quite severely as he tried in vain to staunch the bleeding. Hannibal wondered if Will's empathy goes so far as to let him feel her dying. Was that the trigger to his overwhelmed trembling?

Will's hands were covered in her blood. The shade of red, rich against his slightly golden skin. It suited him.

As soon as the woman laid truly dead, Hannibal watched Will reprioritize. He drew his gun and kicked the door now, storming into the house. A power in his body he shields and holds close. People would perpetually underestimate him, Hannibal was sure.

"Garret Jacob Hobbs, FBI." He yelled out. His voice held none of the tremors that wracked his body. Brave boy.

Hannibal slowly followed Will in, stepping over the corpse only sparing her a momentary glance. His attention was still trained on Will further into the house.

They could both hear another feminine voice whimpering from further inside. The daughter most likely.

Gunshots rang out. Blistering across the hall walls to Hannibal. First one, then clusters sounded off until silence fell. There was a moment, a twinge of dread in Hannibal, that those shots might not have come from Will's gun. The concern was a curious feeling.

Hannibal rounded into the kitchen to find Will, crouched over a bleeding whisp of a girl and staring at the corpse he made. Bullet holes, a mirror to the bodies gored onto antlers. His whole body still for one moment as he looked upon his work. Then he broke. Trembling so hard he could be convulsing, but his hands, steady over the bleeding gash in the girl's neck.

"No. No-no-no-no." Will murmured, voice finally wavering with the adrenaline coursing through him

In that moment Hannibal had never seen anything more beautiful. At that moment, Hannibal knew Will had such immense potential and that he would foster this bond they could have. Will would be his in time.

Will

Will

This day has slipped into a dream-like state, with the hazy quality that comes with three glasses of wine and good food in the breezy heat. I find myself leaning on the trunk of the tree looking out onto the water ahead of me. The dogs are all piled over by the bank, snoozing happily after running free for a couple hours.

My eyes dance over the lazily running stream surface but always get drawn back to Hannibal. I am trying not to stare at him. He's stretched himself out on his back, right in front of me. He's long since taken off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and undone the top two buttons of his very white shirt. He looks so peaceful. It feels like every time I see him now, I see something new. New sides of him. It feels like he's sharing these private bits of himself with me.

The way he has his fingers laced behind his head pulls at those pearly buttons on his shirt. I'm taken by the fact those little buttons are embroidered into place with decorative little thread leaves that match the pattern of the shirt itself. Such a nice detail.

I also notice just how broad he is, and the shirt doesn't do much to hide how solid he must be under there. I don't know what I thought. I think I just didn't. I just didn't think of what he looks like under all those layers of fine, eccentrically patterned fabrics he wears. Noticing now stirs something inside me and I feel my skin light up with tingles. I'm glad he's not paying attention to me.

We aren't talking. We chatted through lunch but fell silent a little while ago. I like that Hannibal is comfortable with silence. Makes it easier to be around him. I think he might even be dozing off right now. He hasn't moved in a while. I've long since given up pretending that I'm looking at the river. The steadiness of his breathing is making me drowsy. I feel warm, fuzzy, and surprisingly content at this moment.

His face is still. Totally expressionless. I wonder if he can feel me watching him. The rise and fall of his chest is sort of mesmerizing. Mixed with the wine and comfortable atmosphere, all those sleepless hours are catching up to me. I finish off my glass of wine before I drop it. Because yes, Hannibal brought real crystal glass wear to a picnic.

I set the glass down, spotting his jacket. The color is something I had never seen him in. I wonder if it's new. It's folded neatly in his previous spot next to me. I reach out and finally touch it, like I've been wanting to since he stepped out of his car. Its fabric is soft, something about its finish feels almost suede-like, but it looks like cotton.

"Do you like the jacket?" He doesn't appear to have moved or even opened his eyes.

I feel caught out. “Yeah. I really like the color.” I admit. The fact he isn’t looking makes me able to keep my hand on it though. Enjoying the feeling of the soft fabric.

“Is that so? I’ve never seen you wear it.” He seems happy carrying this conversation as he is. “It would suit you.”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I don’t really have a reason to wear stuff like that.” I can’t help but long for it through.

“Why do you need a reason?”

I huff at him. “I totally get why you’d feel that way. You always dress exactly as you’d like.” His style might not always be my taste, but he always looks great in it. I do envy that fact about him. How willing he is to do just as he pleases. Look how he wants. Stand out.

“What stops you?”

“It’s easier to blend in. I wouldn’t be taken seriously at work if I dressed like that. There’s a time and a place. I just don’t have the time or the places.”

“Do you wish to dress more as you did while at social events with Jack?”

I groan. “No... I hated those events. And he picked all those clothes. I felt dressed up like his little doll.”

His eyebrows raise slightly, just for a second. “Would you have enjoyed them more, if you were not there as his accessory?”

That makes me laugh. “You make it sound like I was Jack’s arm candy. I hardly qualify as that, even dolled up. I had a role to play. I played it.” I got kind of good at it, at least for a while. “I don’t know if I’d enjoy that stuff regardless. Socializing and all, not my thing.”

“Putting aside the networking Jack had to do, did you enjoy the events you were there to see?”

“I enjoy music,” I say tentatively. “The orchestra or even the opera sometimes was nice. When everyone is focused on the performance, and I don’t have to *be* something and just listen.”

Hannibal continues to lay there, basking in the sun like a big cat, but I can see him file that away in his mind. Something about the subtle tightening of his eyebrows maybe. He then rounds back, “You said there’s a time and a place and that you have neither for wearing things you find beautiful. That’s not so true anymore. You have far more time away from work than you did before.”

I don’t like that. “Sure, but that doesn’t mean I have the places for it still.”

“You don’t need a place. But if that's important to you, would you like to start going to places you feel it's appropriate to dress the way you desire?” He removes one hand from behind his head and pops another button of his shirt to tug at it to fan himself.

My throat feels dry. I pour myself more red wine. “That usually still requires socializing.” I’m feeling a little cornered by this conversation.

“You socialize perfectly well with me.” I roll my eyes, which he doesn’t see. But then he moves to his side. Head propped in his hand, looking right at me. “Would you like to go for lunch with me next weekend, then to the Rawlings Conservatory?”

Laying like that makes his shirt fall open, and it's all too close to the images I conjured in the shower. I’m trying to think, but I feel like my thoughts sputter and stop short of processing an answer. He waits, still, watching me.

“I don’t have anything to wear,” I say lamely, though truthfully. This is all in the spirit of me dressing in things I like, and I don’t have those things.

His lips spread into a pleased smile. He looks like I’ve said exactly the right thing. I don’t get how, but then he says, “We can go shopping the day before, would you like that, Will?”

I down my wine, again, and just nod. Because I would. The whole idea of this experiment has me feeling anxious but excited in a way that has me itching at the thought of waiting a week.

He sits up, legs crossed in front of him, facing me. Criss-cross apple sauce. The thought almost makes me laugh, nervous tension needing an escape.

I didn’t see when he picked it, but he produces a bright orange and yellow flower. It’s one of the sneezeweeds smattered around here. He offers it over to me. “For your collection.” His expression is neutral, but his eyes are fond. Liquid warm brown, so warm there’s almost red in them, like the hallucinogenic honey from Nepal, mad honey. My head swims a little as the heat and the fourth glass of wine hits me.

He’s holding it out for me. I shift to my knees to reach for it. “Thank you.” My voice comes out soft and brittle. It's a pretty little thing, shockingly bright for a wildflower, with its deep orange and yellow gradient petals. I feel more than see Hannibal stand up, while I gaze at the little gift. I love it. So, I place it carefully in the center of my growing bouquet.

“You have a penchant for beauty,” Hannibal observes. It feels like an odd fit of a statement. But when I look up at him his shirt is hanging loose and open and he’s undoing his belt and my mind sputters, stops, and falls straight into the gutter.

I feel like I’m almost looking at this scene like an outside observer. Hannibal, standing there, bare chested and elegant hands casually disrobing and me wide eyed and on my knees in front of him. Only the remnants of the food between us as a barrier.

He’s not.

My eyes rake down him, following his greying chest hair and the fine line it turns into down his stomach and disappears beneath the waist of his pants.

What’s happening?

He’s not.

There’s a crushing disappointment rising up in me. Did I miss something? I don’t want this.

He’s beautiful.

Do I? I feel confused and off balanced. Most of all worried that our whole relationship wasn’t what I thought. This doesn’t make sense.

“What are you doing?” I manage to choke out.

He looks out to the water. “I feel like swimming.” He removes his shirt completely now and folds it neatly. As he moves closer to me, towards his jacket actually, I flinch. I can’t help it. He seems to finally notice the state I’m in. “Will?” He kneels next to me, takes me in properly, and looks... chagrined, “I’ve shocked you. I apologize that I did not make my intentions clear before starting to undress.” He is looking at me, watching, observing, careful to see how I receive this and react.

Everything in his body and tone geared to make him disarming, unthreatening. The contrast of it makes me suddenly realize just how imposing he actually is on a regular basis, hidden behind all his charm and sophistication. It reminds me of that day in the hospital when he appeared truly scary. *To protect me.* I wonder how much of that lives in him, under the surface all the time.

It's enough of a distraction, I realize just how ridiculous I’m being. “No. No. I don’t know what got over me. I’m fine.” I can’t look at him. Not with his compassion and confusingly captivating bare chest. “Sorry,” I say, averting my eyes from him entirely.

“Do not apologize. You were not in the wrong in any way.” He starts to put his shirt back on.

“No.” I dart out and grab an errant sleeve. “Please, you want to swim. Let’s swim.” It's a good idea. I’m hot and now uncomfortably sticky. I’d like to let water remove this feeling from me.

He watches me, uncertain, and pauses with one arm in his shirt. The other sleeve gripped in my hand. It brought us closer together. He’s finally sweaty. This close I can see the moisture that's gathered across his collarbones and neck. Not much, but enough to make the scent of him stronger as the breeze carries it to me.

I have to shut my eyes. He’s looking like he wants to ask if I’m sure. Give me an out. “Please.” Just ignore me before. “I want to swim too.”

“We will swim then.” He states simply, stands, and turns his back to me as he undresses efficiently.

He’s giving me as much space and privacy as manageable when we are about to go swimming naked together. The fact that I need that room is stupid. I feel stupid for freaking

out like that. He’s not interested in me like that. He wouldn’t just flip things on me so suddenly. I trust him. I should act like it.

He strides off towards the part of the stream that's pooling, making a nice almost pond-like space for swimming.

Tired of myself, I try to pull back from the moment. I try not to watch him go. I try not to be affected too. Not to notice his taught muscles or the way they shift and move as he walks. No, strides into the water like the water wouldn't dare to be too cold for him. I definitely try not to notice his ass.

I turn my back on him as he submerges himself.

I strip. Practically fling my clothes off, not giving myself time to feel self-conscious.

The momentum keeps me going till my feet hit the water's edge.

He emerges from under the water, for a moment giving the impression of an alligator waiting for some unsuspecting creature to take a drink, but the impression is broken when he pushes his hair away from his face and he smiles at me. “It's not cold.” mistaking my hesitation entirely.

I wade in. He’s right. It’s perfect.

Or at least I try to until I'm about waist deep, but I’m a bit unsteady on my feet and slip, going under fully.

Next thing I know I’m being pulled back up, breaking through the surface of the water. The quick shock of cool water clears my head more effectively than my determination had managed and I’m peering out at Hannibal as he holds me at arm's length as he walks us deeper into the water to flatter ground.

“Are you alright?” He looks concerned, looking me over for damage.

Laughter bubbles up and breaks out of me and his eyes crinkle at the corners. I’m straight up cackling. I must seem manic. “Guess swimming after all that wine isn’t the smartest thing.” I’m clutching onto him, not trusting myself yet.

Despite the cool water, his skin is hot to the touch.

I’m not looking at him anymore. I can’t because I’m torn. Something feels different. I may have wildly misinterpreted his undressing, but something *is* different. What’s worse is I think it's all coming from me. I dread the change. Hannibal is the safe point. My paddle. The buoy in the storm that is my fucked up life. But I can’t deny I am relishing the feel of the bare skin under my hands.

He’s making no move to take his hands from my upper arms either. Holding me in place. His hands squeeze just this side of too tightly. When I look at him finally, nothing changes about his expression, but despite his crow's feet showing his amusement at me, his eyes are intense as he says, “I will keep you safe.”

And fuck me if that doesn't go straight to my dick. Don't get hard. Don't get hard. Just don't. I need space. I need him to stop looking at me like that. So, I let go of him and splash him right in the face.

He goes blank for a moment. Completely expressionless. Oh shit… maybe he's not the playful type. Except I know he is. I'm frozen, waiting for a reaction from him.

A slow grin spreads across his face and I correct my earlier mental picture of him. Not alligator. Shark.

He dips under the water and grabs my ankles and I'm under the water again.

The rest of the afternoon breaks into a full on water war. The splashing and commotion excited the dogs, and they jump in and join the game to the best of their ability. Hannibal plays with them as much as me. It breaks all the tension in me. I can't think of the last time I had *fun.*

Playing is followed by lazily drying out in the sun. I'm remarkably unself-conscious of my nudity or his. I even doze off in the last of the afternoon's deep heat.

-

"Will" I'm being shaken awake, and I resent it. It's perfectly warm and I'm perfectly comfortable. Resting properly for once. One dog has their head and paws resting on my lower leg and another curled up at my side. "Will. You need to get dressed or you will be eaten alive by mosquitos."

The idea of mosquito bites where no mosquito should ever be able to reach has me begrudgingly sitting up.

Hannibal is fully dressed again, but his hair is falling over his forehead. Even river washed and air dried he still looks stylish as hell. I guess that's what a four-hundred dollar haircut does. Or whatever ridiculous price he pays.

I reach around blearily for my clothes. They aren't where I left them.

He hands me a neatly folded stack of my clothes and I raise an eyebrow at him. Neat freak.

"Clothes should be treated with care." Is all he says, then moves to pack up the remnants of our picnic. I snicker quietly and he tisks at me but carries on.

Orange and pink streaks through the deepening blue of the sky. It is getting late. The sounds of nature around us are switching over in preparation for nighttime. Thousands of birds and chattering in their trees, the cicadas are dying down and being replaced with crickets, and the wind is picking up. I don't want today to end.

But I dress and help Hannibal gather up our things to make it like we were never here. It doesn't feel right. A day this lovely should leave a mark somehow. This spot though will move on. The best day I've had in years, just a fleeting moment in the wind.

I gather the dogs and we head back to the real world.

I'll remember today for forever.

-

We are almost home when Hannibal breaks the companionable silence, we have been traveling in. Quiet and contemplative he states, like he's decided just ripping off the band aid is the best option, "Abigail has been asking about you."

My stomach sinks, but my heart fills with hope. Back to the real world indeed. "Yeah?"

"She's worried about you. I've kept her apprised of your progress while in the hospital. She didn't think you would wish her to visit. I couldn't convince her otherwise." He's walking next to me, looking out at the scenery. Giving me space away from his eyes to process.

"I didn't think she would want to visit. I really fucked up with her." Guilt tastes bitter in my throat. "I should have apologized to her ages ago," I admit quietly.

"You were in no condition too."

"I've been out of the hospital for a while. I could have called even. Anything."

"Distance is sometimes the right choice. Both of you needed to gain perspective on what occurred between you." He says in his therapist tone. It kind of pisses me off, but I know I'm mostly just mad at myself.

"What *occurred* was I scared her. I took her back to a major sight of her abuse, cornered her, and promptly had an encephalitic freaked out to figuring out the extent she was involved in her father's murders." I spit out. I'm so ashamed.

"You were not well, Will. It's also a very disturbing thing to learn of." He tries to soothe me. It doesn't work.

"You knew. You didn't *blame her."* I sigh, something deep inside me expelling from my body with the air and it comes out as a confession. "I thought I killed her. I saw myself do it... She's just a child. She was just trying to survive him, and she *did."* I feel so much pride that she did now. Now that my head is clear. *"* But I kept him alive in my head, didn't have the control to hide that from her. I scared her. I wouldn't blame her if she never wanted to see me again."

Hannibal stops me with a hand on my shoulder. His grip, firm, authoritative, just like his voice. "Your mind was on fire. Yet you still held to yourself. You did not hurt her. Garret Jacob Hobbs was never a threat to her through you." I can feel him want me to look at him, but I don't. I don't really believe him.

"Abigail is safe with you, and she wishes to see you." He squeezes my shoulder, then continues striding down the path towards the house.

I follow behind him for a while. Thinking. Puzzling this new bit into the guilt and shame. She wants to see me.

“Are you sure?” I ask. I’m pathetically hopeful.

“Yes. Would you like me to go with you?” He says, like he knows I’ll go. I will go. Of course, I will. If she wants me, I’ll be there. I’ll apologize and spend every day from now on earning her trust back. But I should go alone.

“No. No, thank you. I’ll go Wednesday maybe.” I dread the phone call asking her if that works for her. I don’t want our first conversation to be over the phone.

Hannibal has slowed to pace beside me again, watching me. “Alright, if I can be of assistance-”

I cut him off, “Could you tell her? I... I don’t want to call ahead, but I don’t want to just show up.” I’m literally wringing my hands.

“Of course, Will.”

-

The beginning of the week is going marginally better than last week. No new classes means no more need to address the elephant in the room. The elephant being the very dead Jack. Jack who very much still haunts every hall I walk down.

This time I was prepared. I spent no moment outside of lecturing without headphones on and music playing. I walked nowhere without reading something. A book, lecture notes, fucking twitter. I spoke to no one. Looked at no one and left as soon as possible. Everything I can do to limit the fucking hallucinations of him waiting around every corner.

I only have one class left for the day and I am waiting out the time in the back corner of the campus food court. I used to never come here. Too many people, but I also just couldn't sit in the lecture hall alone. I kept hearing his footsteps even over the music.

Luckily, I managed to find a table for two, removed the second seat, and put my back to the rest of the packed room. The wall is decent company. It doesn’t need anything from me. My back to the room makes me feel isolated, but vulnerable and exposed at the same time. It’s better than seeing the teaming mass of people though so I’m dealing.

I am shoveling chao mein into my mouth as my phone rings. The little bubble of quasi peace I’ve created breaks as the instinctive dread of a new case makes the food in my stomach leaden.

But there is no new case of course. It’s not Jack calling me. I hate the constant crashing in of reality. Losing your husband shouldn’t be something you can forget. Even for a moment.

I toss my fork to the tray next to my discarded chopsticks and flip my phone over. It’s Hannibal.

“Hello?” I know I don’t sound very enthusiastic, but I am glad it’s him calling, out of anyone.

“Hello, Will. How are you?”

“Fine, eating lunch. How are you?”

“I am good. Making some lunch myself.” He sounds easy, there's always a tone to him when he’s cooking. Fully in his element and content.

“I’m jealous.”

“What are you eating?” He’s going to hate the answer. It’s always weird to have this kind of idle chit-chat with Hannibal. It's small talk but easy somehow. I know it can ebb and flow into other things and he won't mind. It feels strangely intimate. In my little corner, looking at nothing. Only listening to him.

“Noodles from the food court.”

“Will.” He sounds discontented. I can see him in my head. Phone tucked between his ear and shoulder, paused in dicing up something, eyes closed with just the barest hint of exasperation showing on his face.

It endlessly amuses me to tease him with the terrible (to him) way I eat. These noodles are actually not bad if I eat them fast while they are still piping hot. Some strange congealing happens when they cool though.

I’m smirking, I know he can hear it in my voice. “You can’t curate my every meal, Hannibal.”

“Maybe I should. You eat like a particularly unreasonable college student.”

Just for that, I take another bite just to answer with my mouth full. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Will.” He admonishes, but I can hear a smile in his voice too. “Appalling boy.”

That makes me snort laugh extremely unflatteringly. *Boy?*

“ Regardless, I called to let you know Abigail is free tomorrow for lunch.” He continues before I can think of more ways to torment him.

“Oh.” All my accumulated good cheer over this call shrivels up and dies. “Ok. Ok, that's good.”

“It will be alright, Will.” His tone is soft.

“Yeah, yeah it will.” Things falter a bit with my dead-end reply. I am apparently unable to keep up a conversation adequately anymore.

“Do you still wish to go alone?” It’s kind of him to offer again. But I shouldn’t hide from this.

“Yes, I think I should.”

“Alright. Will, I’d also suggest, if you find yourself comfortable enough, you talk to her about coming off your suppressants.”

“I’m not going to talk to her about *that.”* I must sound scandalized.

He chuckles. “I would suggest someone else, but from what I understand Abigail is the only other Omega you are close with, and you, her. It may do you both some good to bond over that.”

-

I am pacing outside the main entrance of the Port Haven Psychiatric facility. Have been pacing for maybe ten minutes.

I’m too early, but I couldn’t wait in my car any longer.

So, I’m pacing from one decoratively floral bush to another in the small front garden by the door, making time.

I’m maybe forty passes in when my anxious deliberation is interrupted. “Excuse me Sr. Are you here for Abigail Hobbs?”

My head snaps up, I must look a little wild eyed because she softens herself, making her presence and voice soothing like she would for the more skittish of the patients here. Jeez, I must be in a state.

I try to compose myself, slip into a semblance of someone who should in fact be Abigail’s legal guardian, not some anxious nut who broke her out and scared the shit out of her. “Yes, but I’m early.”

“She said you can come up anyways.”

My expression must scream ‘how’ because she smiles and continues gently, “She saw you through the window in her room.”

“Oh...” My ears grow hot at being caught nervously pacing. “OK, thanks.” I tuck my head down and head in.

At her door I knock quietly, she might not even hear it.

“Come in.” She calls through the door, so I push it open.

She’s sitting on her bed, reading a book. She takes a moment to finish the sentence she is on and puts the book neatly on her side table before looking at me. More and more she’s taking after Hannibal. She’s schooled her expression into an impression of his plaid blank stare. It

makes my heart squeeze with gratitude that he has been there for her while I couldn't. He's more suited to be her guardian than I am.

We stare at each other for a few moments. Though her mask is in place she doesn't have the same control. Her eyebrows twitch up, betraying her true emotions and I have to break our standstill. "Abigail, I am so sorry." My hands flap uselessly at my sides. I have nothing more than how sorry I am and myself as an offering.

I can see her take a deep breath, try to gather herself, remain impassive. Unmoved. But she breaks. She comes at me and into my arms. I don't think we've hugged before, but she tucks herself under my chin like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"I'm so sorry," I say again, my voice is thick with feeling.

She shakes her head against me. "No, no. You were sick and I... I... God Will. I did do it. I did help him. You should have told someone."

"Shh." I squeeze her tight to me. "No. No, Abigail. You survived him. Everything you did was to survive him. Not your fault. Not at all."

She lets out a shuddering breath. She's trying not to cry. I can feel the relief pouring off of her. My hand smooths over her silky hair.

"I was so worried about you." She pulls back just enough to look at me. Her eyes, red rimmed and a little glossier than usual. "I'm so sorry about Mr. Crawford." Her hand fisted in my shirt tightens.

I don't really know what to say. "Thanks." Is all I can muster up. She shouldn't have to worry about that. He would have hunted her down. He would have found something too. Eventually. It's an uncomfortable thought to be relieved for Abigail that Jack is no longer able to go after her. Almost like being relieved, he's dead.

We move apart, dropping from the hug to stand close together instead. Her voice is hushed and intimate "How have you been doing?" like if she doesn't ask softly, I'll spook and run away.

She might be right. "Better, but not great, kid."

"The encephalitis?" Her big blue doe eyes are watching me raptly.

"Gone. I'm healthy." I pause. "I'm fine now." I try to give her a smile, but it may just look like a grimace.

She grimaces back a bit, but she doesn't push. "Where do you want to go for lunch?" she asks instead. I'm a little surprised she'd want to go anywhere with me for a while. I expected we would just be eating here.

"I saw an Italian place on my way through town. We don't have to leave though, if you don't want to."

“Please.” She squeezes my arm for a moment then bounces off to grab her coat. Abruptly cheerful. “I’m going so stir crazy here. Italian sounds great.”

She’s trying to put me at ease. All water under the bridge, but I know she’s wearier than that. This show is for my benefit. So, I don’t keep wallowing in guilt with her. I imagine she has too many people around her acting somber.

While her back is to me, I close my eyes and take a steadying breath. Resolved to be what she needs me to be.

-

Most of lunch goes really easily. The feeling of solace builds in me at her steady determination to be ok with everything between us, to be ok with me, has me happily chatting along with her about group, her annoyances at the other residents, her alternative options for college.

We are deliberating the pros and cons of her going the online university route when she slides in, “Hannibal was saying I could look at Europe for college options if I’m willing to travel far.” She’s fussing with the remnants of her pasta as she says it.

I have to admit, thinking of her leaving. Going to Europe. So far away. Alone. Brings up a surge of protective, *possessive,* ugliness that I squash the moment I notice. The fact she knew too, brings a sickening tang to my mouth and I abandon the last bite I was about to eat. We both know why she was nervous to tell me this, and what my initial emotional reaction would be.

But I am *not* her father, so I respond the way she deserves. “Did he recommend France or Italy more?” I even manage a teasing smirk.

The tension in her deflates and she smiles wryly back at me, “He can’t say enough about either. But he also recommended London, in case I didn’t want to deal with the language barrier. Plus, people will likely have no clue who I am all the way over in Europe.”

“You know, you could change your last name, for the sake of anonymity,” I suggest. It would really make her life easier.

“I’ve been thinking about that. Freddie said it would make it seem I’m running. Hiding from what people *think* I did.” She says 'think' with bitter irony.

“Ms. Lounds doesn’t want you to change your name because it would lower the SEO for her articles.” I want to ask why she’s even still talking to that woman, but I know why. It's that book, the money. She doesn’t need it now. I can provide for her now. Well, technically Jack can provide for her, and isn't that just a funny turn of events? “Look you need to be very careful that person. She doesn’t have your best interest at heart. She’s a vulture and will turn on you if it’s profitable. Don’t forget that.”

“I know, Will. I’m not that naive.” She gives a patented teenage eye roll that suddenly makes her look exactly her age and I soften back down. She’s so smart. She’s a survivor. “But I’ll

need the money if the book works out, especially if I go to London." She tries to bring me back with a conspiratorial grin.

"You don't need the book. Abigail. I can pay for your college, even in London."

"You can?" She looks at me sharply, her brows knitted together.

"Uh yeah, Jack, you know..." I shrug awkwardly.

"Will, no. That's... he left that for you." She reaches out searching for my hand to hold and I offer it up easily.

"It's not like I'm using it. I'd honestly be happy to provide for you." I give her hand a squeeze.

"I... don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. Think on it. I already consider it yours, if you decide you want it."

She looks down at our joined hands and I do too. Hers are so delicate and pale in mine. Though they are not without their calluses.

"You know. Hannibal offered to pay for my school too." I just look at her. "I didn't want to accept without talking to you first."

I can feel my heart thump heavy and slow in my chest. Of course, he has.

"Looks like you have far more options in life now than Freddie Lounds. Take advantage of all of them." I can't help teasing her a little. "Going to London with a benefactor, how very old world of you." She snickers behind her hand.

"Maybe I'll let you go fifty-fifty. I think Hannibal would kill me if I spend his money on ramen noodles."

"Oh, he would. He gave me shit yesterday for eating from a food court."

We devolve into giggles, coming up with more and more ridiculous things he would have an aneurism over.

-

The drive back was relaxed and companionable.

"I talked all lunch about me. Tell me what's going on with you?"

"Nothing is really going on with me. I teach, then go back home. I'm pretty boring."

She huffs and waves me off, "Please, you are hardly boring. How's your house? Work? I don't know, life?"

“The house is good.” I steal a glance at her, quick, while driving. “Would you like to come see it sometime?”

“Yeah! Hannibal said where you live is beautiful.” That fills me with pleasure. I must be blushing, but I can’t tell if she notices while keeping my eyes on the road.

“Yeah, the countryside is really something. You’ll like the forest.” I try to sound unaffected.

There’s a glint to her voice that makes me think I was unsuccessful. “He said he likes your house too. Called it picturesque. And your father’s paintings.”

I understand why Hannibal would be talking to Abigail about me to this extent. I was hiding away from her, and he was being our connection. I appreciate that he did that. But I can’t help but also be touched he’d deem these things interesting enough to report on.

“I’ll show them to you when you come over.” Is all I can really reply to that.

She thankfully moves on, “Alright, tell me something else.”

Hannibal recommending that I talk to her about the whole suppressant situation pops into my head, and I know he’s right. So, I just blurt it out. If I don't make it weird, it won't be weird. “I ran out of suppressants.”

There's a pause while she takes in the abrupt topic change.

“Oh...” is all she says for a moment. “Oh! Oh, shit, the new rules. Oh my god, Will, are you feeling ok still?”

“Yeah, I’m fine for now. Are you...?”

She shakes her head. “I never took them. Dad didn’t allow me.”

That stalls us both out for a moment. But she continues on. “How long have you been taking them?”

“Since my first heat. My dad put me on them as soon as he could. We both took them religiously.”

“Wait so you’ve never gone through heat since you were really young?” She sounds mildly horrified.

“No...”

“I’ve seen some of the other girls at the facility have to come off suppressants and that was with the docs doing it right. It doesn’t seem... good.” She’s looking over at me wide eyed. I can feel her gaze. Worried. She’s worried for me. “What’s it going to be like for you?”

“I don’t really know. I honestly don’t even really remember what that first heat was like at this point. It’s supposed to be rough though, coming off of them cold turkey.” I don’t know

what I'd prefer, for it to just hit me fast and hard so I can get it over with or for the more prolonged possibility, it sounds tormenting, but I'd have more time.

"You need to take a leave from work. It's... it's really not safe." the last part comes out of her in an anxious whisper.

"I've just been out for almost two months. I can't leave for an indefinite amount of time just waiting to see when it hits me. Plus, Hannibal said he would take care of me if things get bad."

She suddenly chokes and coughs. "Hannibal? Wow ok. Like I suspected but I didn't really know you guys were like... together."

Wait what? My eyes go wide as what she just said registers, what she thinks I just said. "No. *No.* I didn't mean... I meant he's going to look after me. In case the fevers fuck with my recently encephalitic brain. Not..." Oh my god. "Wait, you *suspected?"*

"Well, yeah... It's clear you guys have a bit of a thing, right?"

"No." I'm desperately trying not to turn bright red.

"Really?" She sounds utterly surprised.

"I was, 'til very recently, married!" I protest. Completely floored at how she got this idea in the first place.

"Hey, I'm not here to judge." She does a comical shrug, and I can feel her grinning at me.

"Abigail!"

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks" she quotes cheekily.

" *Abigail,"* I growl in warning, but there's no real threat behind it and she knows it because she giggles.

Hannibal

Hannibal

Will was wandering the upper level of Hannibal's office. He made his way up there as soon as he could. Hannibal didn't mind the physical distance Will was putting between them. He understood Will needed the space, needed to maintain his forts to feel safe. Hannibal wanted him to feel safe. He would be patient and wait for Will to come to him in time.

For now, though, Hannibal busied himself with filling in the psychological evaluation Will is here for. He signed his name and stamped over it with his clinic's seal. Everything was in tip-top shape for Jack before they had spoken more than obligatory greetings.

He was curious how Will would react; he held the document in both hands as he walked towards the man scanning his books.

Will looked down from his vantage point behind the banister that frames the upper level. "What's that?" he asked, squinting his eyes slightly. He didn't have his glasses on. Vulnerable but still a shield. His poor eyesight kept the intensity of Hannibal's gaze from fully being perceived.

"Your psychological evaluation. You're totally functional and more or less sane." Hannibal said, adding a playful, "Well done." He left the paper on an end table, easily accessible to Will when he would come down.

Will slowed in his steps and frowned slightly, "Did you just rubber-stamp me?" His tone was incredulous, but with a hint of appreciation, Hannibal could just pick up on. It made him want to smile.

Will watched Hannibal intently. Hannibal just stood there, looking up openly at Will, while he explained, "Yes. Jack Crawford may lay his weary head to rest knowing he didn't break you and our conversation can proceed unobstructed by paperwork."

Will began to pace, circling Hannibal from above. He looked around at the books again as he stated, "Jack thinks I need I need therapy."

"What you need is a way out of dark places when Jack sends you there." Hannibal turned with Will and watched him as he roamed. Watched as the nervous energy worked its way out of him through the pacing and exploration of Hannibal's space.

Hannibal was also keenly aware it was Will's way of playing a bit of a power game with him. 'I may have to be here against my will, but you can't stop me from poking around in your space. Your territory.' A display and attitude he would find intolerably rude from anyone else, but from Will, his Will, he was delighted by it. Intrigued.

"Last time he sent me into a dark place, I brought something back." Will threw down at him. Hannibal knew exactly where to take this. To lure him in. A shared goal.

“A surrogate daughter?” He was careful to pull his eyes away from the object of his attention. He moved his straightened random items on his desk which allowed Will his moment of surprise, a moment to process away from eyes.

However, when Will didn’t respond Hannibal went on, back fully to Will. “You saved Abigail Hobbs’ life; you also orphaned her. It comes with certain emotional obligations regardless of empathy disorders.” Hannibal stacked his notebook and papers leisurely all while he could feel Will’s watchful gaze on him.

“You were also there, you saved her life too. Do you feel obligated?” Will’s back was up, defenses high at the invasive observation. Perhaps he thought Hannibal would have replied with some kind of denial. A caveat of why that's different.

It was that moment where Hannibal made sure to catch Will’s eyes, and with as much honesty as he could safely share, he responded, “Yes. I feel a staggering amount of obligation.” Hannibal was surprised by this fact when he first felt it. Watching over Abigail in the hospital. Something about her countenance, so much like Mischa’s. A child who’s fallen into his and Will’s lap. Hannibal could envision a family. He knew a family would be important to Will. Someday. She was already important to him. So, she became important to Hannibal in turn.

“I feel responsibility.” He continued and held Will fast in his gaze, knowing the beginnings of their connection were growing in that moment for Will. “I fantasized about scenarios where my actions may have allowed a different fate for Abigail Hobbs.”

Will was the first to break that moment, their first moment of mutual understanding that was such a rarity for both of them. It was too often a one-way street for his poor Will. So alone. So singular. Yet so connected to everyone, that it burdens him. Hannibal felt his own isolation echoed in Will. Connected to none, but now, connected to one.

Will nodded to himself and took in a breath. His guard was still so high up, but Hannibal watched him as he decided to share his concerns about Abigail. “Jack thinks that Abigail Hobbs helped her dad kill those girls.”

A surge of protectiveness rose in Hannibal. He had to pause before asking, “How does that make you feel?”

Will smirked at him and evaded the question with a sarcastic tone, “How’s it make *you* feel?”

“I find it vulgar.”

“Me too”

“And enterally possible.” Hannibal knows it’s extremely likely. She’s perfect for them.

“It’s not what happened.” Will denied it outright. Hannibal didn’t let that be a disappointment. He knew Will wasn’t ready for any of that yet. What he needed right then

was to believe in the good in her, the good in himself, and in time in Hannibal. Later, there would be time for everything else.

“Jack will ask her when she wakes up. Or he will have one of us ask her.”

Hannibal watched Will's disgust at that. It pushed him to some kind of limit. He got defensive, pushing back with “Is this therapy or a support group?” It was still too new, with unfamiliar people.

Hannibal watched on with slight amusement at his prickly companion. One step forward, two steps back. “It’s whatever you need it to be.” But he knew he must push just a little bit more. “And Will.” Will met his eyes once more as he leaned over the edge of the banister. “The mirrors in your mind can reflect the best of yourself, not the worst of someone else.”

Will

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will

I pull off my glasses and fling them to the desk I'm at, and I force myself to yawn, to open and relax the muscles of my jaw. I'm getting a tension headache from how intensely I've been grinding my teeth all day.

The headphones and myriad of other distractions that I've been using have failed to account for the sense of smell and touch. The most agitating thing is the ability to feel vibrations. Pallesthesia, I think that's what it's called...

I'm idly rubbing at my masseter muscles. It only results in the barest relief, so I give up and slump back in my chair. My hands hang heavy at my sides while I stare up at the dingy ceiling tiles.

All day, whenever I would be at or touch some kind of table, any surface really for more than a moment, I would feel a slow, but firm, Tap-Tap-Tap.

Trying to grade papers at my classroom desk, a resounding Tap-Tap-Tap would travel from the far corner of the table.

At the lecture podium, I'd falter midsentence when I'd feel that Tap-Tap-Tap in the cheap compressed wood under my hands.

Leaning against the staff room kitchenette counter, waiting for coffee to brew, I'd feel that Tap-Tap-Tap that comes through the countertop up my body.

It was a habit that Jack had when he was thinking. Tap-Tap-Tap with his thumb and two first fingers sharply against whatever flat surface around him.

I never found it annoying before, but now, now that he isn't actually here to be doing it, it shoots anger through me every time, anger and a sinking pit in my stomach. I am starting to feel nauseated. My laptop goes to sleep and the ambient forest video I've been listening to cuts off along with it. I lean forward and hit the space bar, bringing it back to life.

The rushing sound of wind and wildlife surrounds me once more. Open and free, unlike the oppressive cubicle I'm hiding in.

I feel trapped by the persistence of Jack's presence. No wonder people believe in ghosts. Haunted is really the only word for this feeling. I can't run from him here. Even if I drown out his voice, and keep my eyes trained on my phone, I can't stop the brief catches of his scent in the air, deep, like wet mineral rock and his cologne that smelled like spicy cut grass.

Or the feelings of his hands on me. The small unconscious ways he'd touch me. A wide hand resting on the back of my neck, encircling my wrist, or gripping my waist.

Or the feel of the infernal-

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

I shoot to my feet, detaching myself from my desk completely. I can't anymore. I didn't realize I had rested my head in my hand, elbow braced on the table.

My abrupt movement sends my chair tumbling backward. The thud, only slightly muffled by the library carpet. The eyes of most of the students around me glance up at the noise.

Under their scrutiny I deliberately right the chair and efficiently pack my bag, careful not to have any contact with the table itself.

I head to the elevators, opting to move through the bookcases rather than the main paths. The scent of books is kind of soothing. I reconnect my earphones to my phone and play a random song from a playlist I made for my dad ages ago. All his favorites. *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* starts playing, and despite everything, it manages to make me smile. I wish I could talk to him about all this.

As I emerge from the books, there's a group of students waiting for the elevators, so I switch directions and take the stairs instead.

The stairwell seems empty, nothing echoing up to me when I remove one earphone to check. So, I head down in peace.

"Ooh-hoo, nobody knows it. But right from the start, I gave you, my heart." I sing under my breath. I can feel the quiet sound of my own voice reverberate through the concrete stairwell. It feels good to sing. I haven't done so in longer than I can remember.

Conscious that anyone could enter, I resort to humming the rest of the song quietly to myself the rest of the way down to the main floor.

I'm not sure where I am going, but I just want to get outside. Before I can reach the grassy square between buildings, my phone goes off.

"Hey, Beverly."

"Will, are you free right now?" She sounds a little tense. I frown, pulling my phone away from my face to check the time.

"I've got forty-five minutes 'til my next class. What do you need?" I get no reply for a bit, but I can hear either Price or Zeller's voice faintly in the background. Indistinct, but whatever they say prompts her.

“I know you’re not...” She rethinks what she’s going to say, “I’m really sorry to ask, but do you think you could take a look at some of our crime scene photos?” She sounds like she’s asking me to disarm a bomb.

“I assume you haven’t asked permission to clear me to see them?” I’m already resigned to it though. She wouldn’t be asking me if it wasn’t the Chesapeake Ripper.

“No...”

“How many more?” She lets out a gusty breath, down to business now.

“Two. He’s got a theme this time. It’s odd, Will. Even for him.” They must be really stuck if she’s risking this. “Can you still get into the BAU building?”

“Last I checked, yeah. Text me the room number, but I’m not going near the labs...or the offices.”

“Sure thing, Will.” I gave myself away with the last part. Her tone is too gentle. An edge of sorrowful tenderness she probably didn’t even mean for me to hear.

I just hang up. I’m standing in the middle of the walkway, eyes closed, just bracing myself. The sun feels good against my face. It’s bright enough to white out my vision even through my lids and since my music didn’t start back up after the call, I’m just bathed in white, the sound of the breeze, and murmuring voices passing by. Then my phone buzzes with the room number and I head off.

-

I clear the security gate just as simply as I did last week. They chose a conference room on the second floor. Easy enough to explain that I’m just catching up with old colleges if I get caught there and it’s nowhere, I’ve been with Jack, so it works.

I push the door open without knocking. Beverly and Zeller get up from their chairs fast enough to leave them spinning slowly behind them.

“Hey, Will.” They say in unison. Mirrored contrite expressions on their faces. Price just looks at them like he’s thinking of making fun of them for how skittish they are acting. I appreciate his lack of fussing over me.

“Hey,” I come around to their side of the table. When they just stand there, I add. “Alright, show me.”

“Will, are you sure?” Beverly is clutching the files to her chest protectively. Or maybe not protective of them, but of me. Like they might hurt me. Her care is sweet, but I’m getting impatient. This dance is useless, and we all know it.

“Just show me.” I state simply and take a seat as she hands me two files. When I open them, photos spill out. High def, high gloss renderings of the Ripper’s usual high class gore.

But Beverly is right. These aren't his usual standalone art pieces. These are a series. A continuation of Jack's murder tableau.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

"Where's Jack's?" I shift through the pictures, trying to not touch the table too much. The wide shots are both of bodies hung upside-down in poses and costumes.

No one answers me, so I look up at them. Beverly and Zeller are exchanging a look and Price is leaning back in his chair trying to look... guileless. He's not a good actor.

I raise an eyebrow at Bev.

"You don't need to see those. It's ok." She finally answers.

"Yes, I do. This is a trilogy. They all tell one story. Give me the file." I try to sound as brisk and impersonal as possible. I'm not sure how much they buy it.

Zeller looks nervous, "We didn't bring it. We figured you shouldn't... it's not..."

Beverly finishes for him, "We didn't think it would be good for you."

I sigh and look over at Price. "Give it."

He winks at me and pulls it out from his bag. "Knew you'd want them."

I tune them all out as both Beverly and Zeller give him shit. Their care is nice, but I just want to get this over with.

I pull out the wide shot of Jack.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

I have to swallow hard at the acid that rises up in my stomach. In the photo, I can see the smearing of the blood from where I was kneeling in it and dragged away from him.

The tap-tap-tap morphs into a drip-drip-drip. The memory from that day, sounding off in my ears. The last of his blood falling in singular slow droplets into the aura of blood around us both. Same slow resounding rhythm.

Above the huge pool of blood, he hangs. Upside down, face purpling, the only point of his body with blood left in it to discolor. He's dressed in a garish jester costume. Yellow and red

diamond pattern. It's unflattering against his ashened skin tone and that feels intentional. This is an insult. A scathing critique.

He’s held up and posed with ropes, it almost looks like he’s skipping. It's a horrible contrast of whimsy compared to his dead, open eyes. The macabre bundle on a stick with his own heart held over his shoulder. ***Heartless*** .

It's a very clear image. An impressive replica of the tarot card The Fool but reversed. The file has an image of the card for reference.

My head is calm and quiet, shockingly so for the first time in ages. I can’t help but marvel at how impressive it is. To hang a grown person from the rafters of our living room so precisely.

I shift over to the other two.

Andrew Caldwell

Age: 47

Genders: Man, Beta

Occupation: Medical Doctor for Kaiser Permanente Insurance

Tarot Card: The Magician (reversed).

In the photos, a man in red robes and an infinity halo hangs above a near perfect circle of his own blood. His right arm extended past his head holding a simple wooden scepter, other hand, pointing down and to the side, if he were right way up. The Chesapeake Ripper even took care to pin the robes up, so they didn't fall.

I find the information for the third victim:

Michelle Vocalson

Age: 32

Genders: Woman, Omega

Occupation: Customer Service for Stanwood Tailored Coats

Tarot card: The High Priestess (reversed).

She’s been strung up on a chair in pale blue ropes. The same care was given to arrange the fabric neatly despite the gravity. Her hands are in her lap, one holding onto a roll of paper. She’s a serene and peaceful visage if you ignore the blood running from her throat down her face and headdress to pool on the floor.

The image is clear and concise, with the right audience, the meaning will be too.

I pull the photo closer to my face, trying to make out the letters obscured by her hand.

“What does the scroll say?” I come back to the conference room and realize I’ve interrupted a conversation. These three have gotten so used to me doing this, disappearing into a crime scene, they take it in stride now.

“TORA. Meaning divine law.” Zeller answers. They all focus back on me now. Leaning forward almost in unison.

“Tell me about the tarot cards.” I don’t know shit about tarot and their meanings, but the reverse has a different meaning than right side up, I think. *He* wouldn’t have gone through all this trouble if the reverse element wasn’t important.

Price brings up the info on his phone and reads off, “The fool reversed. According to reading-tarot-dot-com, it says this card means you have been acting foolishly, possibly ignoring the consequences of your actions. Or blind to the dangerous situation you’re creating.” Scathing indeed...

“Short sighted and failing to consider the future. Overall, the fool reversed card is a warning to pay more attention and be more cautious going forward.” No future for Jack to watch out for.

“Words associated: foolish, making poor choices, reckless, careless, distracted, gullible, and dull. In love: unhealthy relationships, uncommitted. In Work: Tedious job, risky or hazardous work”

Is this the final taunt then? The Ripper rubbing it in Jack’s face that he lost Miriam Lass? It doesn’t seem right. This seems personal. A censure for misbehavior. He’s shaming Jack for behaving badly, but over what?

Zeller picks up after Price. “The magician reversed: This card warns of a potentially harmful presence in your life, someone who does not have your best interest in mind. The Magician uses illusion to manipulate and deceive for his own benefit.” I don’t know anything about this Dr. Caldwell, but this doesn’t feel like it's about him. He’s merely the model. This still feels like it’s about Jack, or maybe a reference to the Ripper himself.

Price butts back in “Words associated: manipulation, deception, insecurity, sickness, pain disaster trickery, illusion. In love: Lack of willpower, manipulative relationship, betrayal. In work: deception, resistant to change, misspent talent.”

I was right here all along, Jack. You were just too blind to see me. But I saw you.

They barely give me time to think because Zeller cuts back in reading on, “The High Priestess: A block to your intuition. This card is a message to focus less on reasoning and follow one’s gut instincts, that were being ignored. You are going against your convictions and clouded by confusion. Authenticity and self-reflection are key at this time.”

“Associated words:” Price starts right on the heel of Zeller’s last word. Are they really competing over reading definitions? I sigh and try to catch it all. “Selfishness, poor insight,

hidden motives, confusion, shallowness, ignored intuition. In love: Disregarded intuition, self-concealment. In work: underinformed, isolation, disregarded intuition." Price seems pleased at having gotten the last word in and Zeller huffs.

Beverly and I just share a long-suffering look.

"Helpful, thanks." I deadpan.

"You're welcome." They say in unison. Price cheery. Zeller monotone while looking out the small window to his right.

Looking at the Chesapeake Ripper's recreation of the High Priestess I can't feel any connection to the dead omega in the meaning of the cards either.

"The victims, aside from Jack are inconsequential. Each meaning is about Jack. Jack must have done something. Maybe gotten close. Maybe insulted the Ripper in some way. I... I don't remember anything like that though. Did he tell you anything?" I'm looking over at them, searching for anything. This feels so personal. Too private. I'm getting the creeping feeling that it has nothing to do with the investigation.

They each shake their heads.

"No nothing. We've never even gotten close to finding him, or anything about him." Beverly says running a hand through her long hair, getting it out of her face.

I turn back to the photos. Flip through each stack again.

Something about the blood keeps drawing my focus.

"Tell me about the state of the bodies. What did he take?"

Price begins, "Organs were removed for each."

"Typical" Interjects Zeller.

"Heart in the bag and liver and tongue removed from Jack. The Magician's tongue and some bowel were taken. And from the Priestess, she was missing the tongue again along with her liver as well."

"All bled to death." Bev adds.

"That doesn't fit his usual M.O.," I say, looking back at the pools of blood in each photo.

"No not at all. And Jack's heart was removed post-mortem. Which also doesn't fit." Price adds.

"Hmm..." I'm missing something. This is definitely different. "Did any of you bring a laptop? I want to see these digitized."

“Uh yeah” Zeller rustles around and I just stretch my hand out waiting while my eyes remain fixed on the tarot triad in front of me.

“Is it not the Chesapeake Ripper then?” Beverly asks. She’s drumming her fingers against the table which makes me realize I haven’t been feeling Jack’s tapping for a while now.

“No, it’s definitely still him.” Zeller passes me his laptop with the photos up already. “Thanks,” I say absent mindedly. “He’s just saying something *to* us this time.” I’m already absorbed in zooming into all the details.

They are discussing the possible meanings of the cards in relation to Jack, and I am only half listening. My stomach rolls, but not from disgust. These aren’t even gory by the Chesapeake Ripper’s standards. But there’s a teaming anxiety building up in me.

“He’s saying Jack fucked up.” Beverly states.

“But how?” Zeller asks.

“Maybe he’s talking about Miriam. How Jack lost her, and the Ripper got her?” Price throws out there. Though they all dismiss it outright. Jack was being toyed with about her. Not scolded.

The sound of heavy hooves appear in the distance. Hard hoof against faux marble floor in a deliberately slow mocking beat. Each step hitting in time with every four of my heartbeats.

“He must be closer than we realized. More involved. Able to watch us. Watch Jack.” Beverly sounds hushed like she’s following something.

It's getting louder. Closer.

“What do you mean? Like he’s managed to involve himself in the investigation?” Price sounds intrigued, animated even. They both smell blood.

I keep getting pulled back to the blood. He bled them out. Didn’t mutilate them until they died. Even the organs he picked; they could live a while without them.

The blood is important.

“Like he’s one of us?” Zeller says startled.

Important enough to forgo his usual levels of sadism to some extent and keep their hearts beating to pump out as much blood as possible. Pushed them as far as they could go and drained the life out of them. Let it leak and spill over the floor. ***What a mess you made, Jack.***

The stag is near now. Near enough its steps hit the floor unnaturally loud. It doesn’t feel right that no one else can hear it too. Don't feel it’s pull like I do.

I zoom into the reflection in the inky red pools and the Raven Stag stops outside the door. Silent for a heavy long moment.

“I think this is about Will.” Beverly’s words slice right through me, and I snap up to look at her. *She’s right.*

They are all looking at me in vague horror.

“Will?” Zeller sounds disbelieving.

And it all comes together in my head and my veins pump ice laden with guilt through me as I tell them, “He’s chastising Jack for how he treated *me.”*

-

I managed to leave them in the conference room. By the time we were done, I started to feel sick and dizzy from now much my head is hurting. I know I must look bad. I can feel how clammy I am. I’m hot and cold at the same time with the stress pulsing just under my skin. It’s like I’m trembling to a rhythm.

They all tried to convince me to go home. Or at least let one of them walk me to my classroom. But I just couldn’t handle their concern anymore. I pulled the last of my reserves and masked up, reassured them I was fine, and walked out before they could really protest.

I head numbly to the elevators. No one is there, so I press down and wait. My hands and face feel hot, but the rest of me is cold.

Out of habit now, I put in my earphones and play something I don’t listen to. It just feels like rushing noise at this point. I’m sick with the shame at the possibility that Jack was killed *for me* in the Chesapeake Ripper's twisted mind. I’m wracking my brain trying to think of anything that would have prompted that sort of attachment. He’s always been so focused on Jack if he was concerned with the hunt for him at all.

The door slides open slowly to reveal Agent Noble. He looks up at me, gets this arrogant kind of smile, and takes the most minuscule step away from the center.

A sigh pulls out of me with the weight of his expectant gaze. I’m too tired to deal with him, too damn full of everything else terrible that's happened, but also just too damn tired to redirect now and take the stairs.

I step in knowing I’m going to regret it.

I tuck myself into the back left corner and observe my shoes, pretending he isn’t there. I can feel him looking at me. His feet turn and point at me. I don’t look up.

He grabs the string of my earphones and pulls one out of my ear in a harsh yank. I knock his hand away from me before I even consciously decide to.

I’m immediately berated by his entitled bullshit.

“Wow, chill man. It wouldn’t kill you to say hi when someone greets you.” He’s too close.

“Hi.” I level a flat disinterested stare at him.

“Smile, Will.” He’s got a nasty grin twisting his mouth, “We all know you can.”

“I don’t want to talk to you, *Roy.”* When the fuck is this elevator opening? I look past him to the seem of the door that's promising my escape.

He gets in my face, “Maybe if you were more pleasant, people wouldn’t think you’re such a freak.” I can smell the mustard on whatever he ate for lunch as his breath puffs across my face, that's how close he is. I can’t stop the sneer of disgust wrinkling up my nose.

Then to my shock leans into me even closer. I have to brace up against the corner walls to prevent him from touching me. I flinch hard as he whispers in my ear, “I see why Jack liked you though.” I hit my head against the wall just to get away from him. He just takes in a deep breath, and I shove him. Hard.

“Keep your fucking nose to yourself. In fact, just stop perceiving me altogether. You're disgusting.” I prepare for him to get mad at being shoved. I prepare for him to react violently back. But the look on his face is worse, my heart starts racing and fear spikes up my spine. The door is going to open. I’m not really trapped here with him. He can’t. Not here.

He pushes back in, slowly, and watches me with pupils so blown out his blue eyes look almost black, and says very quietly, “You should be nicer to me. I might be nice to you back.”

There's a ping and the doors open. I shove past him and run out, only looking back at the security gate, once I pass through it. He just stands in front of the elevator, and waves at me. Fucking creep. I hate him.

I hate this place.

I just want to go home.

-

I need to get to class, but instead, I find a bench and sit. I have to lean forward; I grip my hands around the back of my neck in a desperate attempt to regulate my breathing. Fuck him. Just fuck him.

“Will?” A soft voice calls out my name. I don’t even recognize it at first.

Can everyone just fuck off?

A light hand joins the voice and touches my shoulder. I flinch away.

“Will, It’s me, Alana.” Oh... “Breath through your nose. Will.” Why do people think it helps to repeat someone's name when they are in distress like that? It's so annoying. Demanding.

I do as she says though. Focus on breathing through my nose and out my mouth. It takes a bit, but the thrumming in my skin slows and so does my breathing.

Alana is rubbing settling circles between my shoulder blades. Reminds me of how Hannibal handled some of my bigger freakouts. Warm hand firm across the back of my neck, where mine are now actually, holding me in place. Grounding me to reality. To him and the moment. I prefer the steady pressure he uses over her languid motion, it's still nice though.

I'm better now, but I don't lift my head up and I don't acknowledge her. God this is embarrassing.

She must sense I'm calmer now because she asks, "Did something happen?"

"No." I say automatically. "Not really...no." There's no point in saying anything. It will just worry her. She would go confront that dick-bag and it would be a whole thing and not benefit me at all.

He won't stop now. She won't scare him off either. It would just be encouragement in his eyes.

Her hand pauses. "Did you see something?"

I let out one grim puff of a laugh and her hand starts back up again. "Not the problem." I realized this would just prompt her to ask what *is* the problem so I add quickly. "It's fine. I'm fine. Just a bad day. Being here is... hard." let her think it's grief. It's not even a lie, that is a big part of the problem.

She's quiet for a long time. Just companionable in a still moment with me as the world rushes around us.

"You have another class this afternoon, right?" She asks. Oh, thank god she's not going to push.

"Yeah...I'm probably late." I start to get up, feeling rather robotic now that the cortisol is settling back down in my system. She stops me with a hand firmly holding onto my shoulder.

"I'll cover it. Go home." I look at her. She's schooled her features to one of causal neutrality, but I can feel her worry. It's cloying against my frayed nerves. I commend and appreciate her effort though, and her offer.

I think of putting up the expected token protest but can't be bothered. I am going to take her up on her offer. I need to.

"Ok." I lean back on the bench, sliding down so my ass is nearly off the seat and my head is resting right on the back of the bench, looking right up into the afternoon sky. "Yeah ok. Thanks." The sky is filled with white fluffy clouds, just like the unreal looking ones in Renaissance paintings.

-

We walk back to the lecture hall in relative silence. She's moving like my guard. Protective and shielding.

She opens the door to the lecture hall for me. Surprisingly we make it with five minutes before students start normally trickling in. I guess I wasn't on that bench for as long as it felt like it.

I pack up my laptop and pull out the thumb drive. "The presentation is on here." I hold it out for her. "it's on the profiles and characteristics of family annihilators."

Instead of grabbing it, she wraps both hands around mine. Her skin is cool and so soft. I really don't want to be touched right now, but I don't have the heart to pull out of her attempts at comfort.

"You can talk to me. You don't have to of course." She's trying to catch my eye, but I don't let her. It's too much right now. So, she just continues. "I'm here if you need me."

I put my other hand over hers and squeeze lightly, "I know. Thank you." then slink my hands out of hers, leaving the drive behind. "You might want to check in on Beverly. I know her new Ripper cases are weighing on her." I add, mainly to distract her, though it is still true.

Alana frowns slightly, and just a bit of color rises into her cheeks. "She told you?"

"No, I figured." I shrug, more at ease now her focus isn't fully on me.

She gives me a little half smile. "Of course, you did. I'm glad you two are keeping up your friendship. I know she was worried about losing you." And that's my queue.

"Thanks for this. I really appreciate it." I shove my papers into my bag and sling it over my shoulder.

"Any time, Will." Students are starting to come in, boisterous as they chat and take their seats.

I make my way out, against the current of people and leave.

-

The next day it's a drag to get myself up, ready, and out of the house to meet Hannibal. Last weekend I was so excited about this shopping trip. It just seems silly and pointless now.

I can't even scathe by at work without harassment, looking like a disheveled nerdy lumberjack. Anything else would just be worse.

Noble made it really clear what it's going to be like from now on. And these alphas are like cockroaches, if you see one, know there are more just out of sight.

I smack my palm against the steering wheel a couple times until it stings. The feeling sort of helps redirect this roiling turmoil inside me that I haven't managed to wash off.

Last night, I spent an hour in the shower, the water was never as hot as I wanted. I never managed to scrub off the feeling of his mouth at my ear or his breath on my face. This morning, I tried again with no success.

I am nearing Hannibal's house now, so I try to psych myself up a bit so I'm not just a moody shit all day to him. I wanted to enjoy this. He was right, I don't have to alter myself a hundred percent of the time. Maybe it will be ok just sometimes, maybe with him it will be fine.

The queasy anxiety in my stomach and little nagging voice in my head sounding of 'It's not safe. It's not safe." seems to want to argue that point.

I pull into his driveway, careful not to block his ridiculous car, and just sit for a moment. The psyching process is failing miserably. I slump forward, forehead resting against the top of the steering wheel. Why do I have to be such a gloomy shit all the time?

Well, if I can't make it genuine, I can at least fake it. Not that he won't see right through it. He always does when I'm masking. But maybe he won't call me on it. *Ha, yeah right.*

I manually activate the muscles in my cheeks, so I have the slightest of smiles to the set of my mouth and relax my eyebrows and forehead. See I know how to be a human.

Right, off I go. I get out of the car and walk up to his front door.

I'm barely finished knocking when he opens the door. "Will, Good morning." He takes me in, and frowns just slightly, "What's wrong?"

I have to laugh. Why do I even bother trying to hide shit from him? I step up to the door. He automatically steps aside to let me in. I pat his chest, just by his shoulder. "Nothing Hannibal, just a weird week. Good morning."

He shuts the door softly and turns back to me, "I presume you don't wish to speak of it at the moment then *?" At the moment.* He won't let it go, we both know it. He's an annoyingly good friend.

"Yeah, not really," I reply, trying to be light and he just nods and says nothing more on the subject. I shift a bit awkwardly. I'm never sure just how comfortable I should be in his house. I am comfortable here, but he holds to such formalities. "How are you?" I ask.

"I am well. Would you like some coffee before we leave? I have some croissants as well." He moves to lead me to the kitchen, already knowing I won't refuse coffee, ever.

"Always trying to feed me." I poke at him.

He throws a smile over his shoulder. "I take great pleasure in feeding you." damn... ok then. I can feel heat pricking at my ears.

-

We end up at a store I have never even heard of in my life. It's definitely way too expensive. It even smells expensive. It has a light scent that has been misted around the room like a field of lilies and sage carried on the breeze.

"Hannibal," I grab the cuff of his suit jacket and whisper fiercely at him, "This is so not a place for me." I am sorely out of place. The finely dressed staff at the end of the store are

assessing me with carefully neutral expressions.

“Why not?” He can’t possibly be that clueless. He isn’t. So, he's being obtuse on purpose.

I just level him a look. A look that usually withers other people, but he just smirks at me. Takes me by the elbow and guides me properly into the store.

It isn’t large, and we are the only people here right now. The staff greets us, after asking if we wish for assistance, *fuck no,* leaves us alone. I’m relieved, for a moment I thought it was going to be one of those pretentious places with ‘assistant shoppers’.

Instead, we are left to ourselves, and Hannibal leads me around the store. It doesn’t seem to have strict gendered sections, so I’m at a loss of where to start. Hannibal seems to have expected this, with his hand at my back, he shows me around, low voice talking about random pieces here and there.

I’m only barely paying attention, half the words he’s saying sound French. Normally I am passable in French, but fashion vocabulary is still way out of my wheelhouse.

Suddenly he pauses and looks at me, and I realize I missed something.

“Sorry, what?” I must sound stupid. The meager enthusiasm I managed to gather over coffee has been replaced with the acute sense I am just way in over my head here.

“What are you thinking you would like to wear?” He asks again, endlessly patient with me. He’s going to need a lot of patience today.

“I have no idea.” Not really true, but I would have no clue of how to start articulating what's in my head. It's not even a solid picture. More a ‘vibe’ as one student stated in their most recent paper. It's an apt term for the vague notion I have of what I want.

“Let's start with a narrowing down of your options. Colors. What colors do you like?” He’s looking at me so intently like he did when I was talking to him about cases. Analysis mode.

Ok. I can work with that. Colors.

“Earth tones, I think. I don’t like a lot of bright colors.” Then I remember how drawn I was to his coral suit. “Well, maybe some. But they still have to feel natural.”

The smile in his eyes makes my heart beat harder for a second. “Good. What about types of clothing.”

“What types are there? There’s shirts and pants. I don’t want to wear a suit...”

“There are many options. You could wear a dress.” his smile turns sharp.

“I’m not wearing a dress, Hannibal.” I know I sound affronted, but really... I’ve never really even considered it before. It’s a weird idea. I promptly decided that that's much too far for today and stop considering it. “Let’s stick to men’s clothing please.”

“If you wish, though you are hardly restricted to it. Many omega men dress femininely.” He says like it's the most normal thing in the world. And I guess it is. It’s just never been part of my world. Dad had us both dressing as masculinely as possible to make life just that little bit easier for us. It does work. Sort of... I remember Noble’s hungry eyes on me. I fully pull away from that whole idea.

“Baby steps Hannibal, please.” The ‘please’ comes out sounding a little more distressed than I meant instead of sounding quipped.

He places his hand on my mid back again “Of course.” and guides me over to a rack of shirts, all vaguely in a masculine cut. “Take a closer look. Pick out whatever catches your eye. You’ll know better how you like it once you try some things on.” He stands back, watching me look.

“Do you shop here?” None of thing stuff looks like things he’d wear really.

“No, I did not figure you would be keen on the places I shop.” He says simply. I’m sure he’s right.

Everything is too elaborate or too boring, too bright or too bull, and there's only one of each item, so I don't really have an idea of sizing. Nothing comes in various shades but the same cut and to top it off there are no price tags. That part in particular makes me nervous.

At the very end of the line is a simple short sleeved button up. The fabric feels light and breathable. But it’s the pattern that’s interesting. It’s a plaid, *of course,* green, with the base color an unbleached cotton taupe. The plaid is almost totally obscured though by huge taupe flowers in a sublet watercolor style. The green peeking through in the line work and light washes. It is quite pretty. I leave it behind though.

I move on to the next rack that has what I can best describe as various versions of polos. There's not much that appeals to me either til my hands brush over a cream shirt. It’s knit or crochet, something at has the fabric running with patterned lines and lots of tiny gaps. Not enough to make it see through, but enough to be noticeable. I pull it off the bar and hold it out. I love it.

“It would look very nice on you.” Hannibal says quietly from behind me.

“I- I guess I’ll try it on.” I feel a little iffy about the fact that the part of the shirt that would normally have buttons on a polo, doesn't have any on this one. Wearing something that would expose that much of my chest is... something.

He takes the shirt from me, holding it with the other shirt I was looking at before. He sees me notice it and just raises a pale eyebrow at me. I don’t argue and he makes an approving noise, low in his throat that has me feeling warm.

This whole thing is turning into a surreal experience and just ends up more so when I get stuck on exactly what kind of pants would go with those shirts.

I let out a frustrated huff, “Why can’t I just try on the shirts with the pants I have on now?”

He gives me a flat look as he explains again, “Because you will not like the way they look with those pants, ruining your experience of these two very nice shirts.”

“What's wrong with my pants?” I’m getting a little too loud. We’ve been in here for what feels like an hour.

“Will, I do not wish to insult you or your pants.” He sounds longsuffering and I can hear the two attendants who are trying to look very busy behind the counter, stifle giggles. Glad someone’s finding this amusing at least.

“Ugh, fine. I don’t know. These?” I reach and grab a random pair of jeans. Pulling them out fully I see they are ripped up to within an inch of their life. “Never mind.”

“This is meant for you to find what you like, but perhaps some guidance would help. May I make suggestions?” He’s already scanning through the five million kinds of pants. How does such a small store have so many pants?

“Please.” I step back and let him. I’m clearly in over my head.

He studies the clothes with such a serious expression. Well serious for him, which means the barest hint of a crease between his brows and slightly pursed lips. It's really all in his eyes. Piercing and critical.

Some of my impatience fades away at how seriously he's taking this. How boring this must be for him and yet he’s still here, watching me fail to shop for myself. Helping me figure it out.

He gathers three pairs of bottoms, then barely raises a hand and one of the attendants appears next to us.

“How can I help you, gentlemen?” The rail thin man says. He’s the type of pretty that glimmers in his harsh lines. The harsh lines of his jaw and cheekbones, Sharp lines of his well fitted black button down shirt. He’s the type of omega man that would look beautiful in a dress. And for a moment, I am almost jealous.

“Please gather these in my friend’s size.” Hannibal instructs politely.

“Certainly.” I get the most thorough and impersonal once over of my life. Like I’m being scanned by a machine. Can he really tell my size from just looking? “Please follow my colleague to the dressing room.” and he's off. Behind him, the colleague waits for us.

She takes us to a comfortable looking back room with two black armchairs, a curtained off corner and so many mirrors it immediately makes me dizzy.

“Would you like anything to drink?” She asks in a bubbly, but polite voice.

I’m about to automatically deny wanting anything, but Hannibal answers before me “A glass of sparkling water.” then turns to me, “Will? Coffee?”

“Uh.” I stall out stupidly. “Sure- I mean yes, please. Thank you.” Jeez. Hannibal is going to regret taking me anywhere with how stilted I can be.

“Of course, I will be back in a moment.” she says, gracefully walking away.

Hannibal just pats my arm and directs me to the armchairs.

They are plush and I sink into mine, happy to be off my feet. Which makes me remember in horror. “Am I going to need shoes?”

The expression I'm wearing must be one of true distress because he laughs outright. Enough that I can see the hand he has over his flat stomach rise and fall. “I am afraid so, Will. We are here to get you the start of a whole new more authentic wardrobe.”

“Are we?” I frown. “I thought this was just an experiment.”

“It certainly is, but I have the impression you won’t be satisfied with just this, once you see yourself.” He leans forward, looking me over. It’s far less impersonal than the attendant.

I swallow. Not sure what to say to that. I’m spared from having to come up with anything as the pretty man comes back in with the clothes. He opens the curtain and hooks them up in the chaining area and leaves again without a word.

“Go on.” Hannibal says.

I walk in and close the curtains around me. It makes the space close and cozy. The thick black fabric takes away the disorienting feeling of being surrounded by mirrors and lets me just focus on two panels. I look over the pants Hannibal chose for me. Two are fine, nothing I would have picked before but one isn't a pair of pants at all.

I stick my head out through the heavy curtains to glare at him, “I’m not wearing shorts tomorrow.”

“It will be hot and there is a greenhouse. You may wish for shorts.” His eyes betray the mirth he isn’t showing in his voice or expression.

“Will *you* be wearing shorts?” I can even picture him in shorts. I’ve seen him naked, and shorts seem like a more farfetched idea. Oh god, I have in fact seen Hannibal naked, and nope, not going there.

“Certainly not.” He says stoically. “But I am not you.” then he adds with a glint in his eye, “Plus, you would look quite darling in shorts.”

“Shut up.” I spit out and duck back in before he can see how fucking hard I’m blushing. Is he flirting?

No.

He’s just tormenting me.

I strip down, leaving my clothes in a pile on the floor over my shoes. Before I can pick the first pair of *pants* I want to try on, Hannibal says “Pick up your clothes, Will.” God, he’s bossy today, it gets me feeling petulant, but in the mirror, I’ve got a big stupid grin on my face.

I ignore him and step on my pants on purpose. I know he's watching my feet since the curtain only goes down to about ankle height.

“Will...”

I’m trying to stifle the laugh bubbling in my chest, but I pick up my clothes and neatly fold them on the tiny bench in here for that very purpose. “Happy?” I call out.

“Very.” He says like he’s bored of my antics, but I know he’s not.

I pop my head back out the curtains for a brief moment to stick my tongue out at him. I don’t know what's gotten over me, but I dart back in before I can see his reaction. Only hearing a low chuckle.

All the giddy excitement I originally had at this whole idea floods back into me. In this little cocoon with just myself and his presence, I forget about Noble and all the reasons this could be a very stupid can of worms to open.

First, I try on the floral shirt with these thin brown chinos. The fit is higher waisted than I normally wear, and they have pleats, which should make them look like something my dad wore in the eighties, but don’t. They actually feel great on and damn did the guy get the size perfect. I first leave the shirt loose, but it makes me look too boxy, so I open the pants again and tuck in the shirt.

“Come out and show me.” Hannibal calls. Before I really think about it, I’m opening up the curtain to rejoin Hannibal. I don't know how I feel about the outfit. It didn’t look right.

He examines me slowly and silently, then gets up and steps up to me. “May I?”

I nod, not really knowing what he even wants to do.

He starts pulling my shirt out a bit. Rearranging it so it's not tucked in so tightly. Then unbuttoning two buttons. I had it buttoned all the way up except for the one on the collar itself.

The feeling of his hands at my throat has me holding my breath while I look at his paisley tie. Today is cobalt blue and navy, over a pale blue shirt and cream colored jacket. He looks fresh.

“There.” He brushes his hands over my shoulders, smoothing out the shirt. It has me looking up into his face. He looks satisfied with his work. Then his eyes meet mine and I'm caught as he says. “And Will, if you stick your tongue out at me again, I may be forced to find something to do with it.” His fingers just barely touch my chin as my heart pounds. I'm sure he can hear it.

I'm dumbfounded. Speechless. Unable to process, I just stare up into his warm brown eyes that are filled with amusement. He's flirting, right? Weirdly, but what else could that be? Is this just how he teases? Some barrier broke between us that day we played in the stream, and I don't know what to make of this new part of him. I like it. I just wish I could respond.

He takes pity on me and gently spins me around by the shoulders so I can look at myself in the mirrors.

His fussing with the shirt really made all the difference. It looks airy and falls flatteringly across my body. It's more open than I normally wear my shirts, but instead of exposing much of my chest, it falls open wide across my collarbones.

My first thought is that I don't look like me. That's not accurate though. I never really look like me. I continue to look over myself in the mirror. I don't look like my usual self, like the costume I present to the world. If this is a hunt for authenticity this is not quite right, but far closer. I don't know how to feel seeing myself like this.

"What do you think?" He asks from behind me. His hands resting on my shoulders still. Looking like this, I almost match him. Not in style. Not even in the way I would match Jack for events. But like I might actually be the type of person who makes sense standing next to him.

"I like it." I can hear the reverie in my own voice. I feel silly for being this affected by clothes, but I can't deny that I am.

"Good. Go try on the rest." He pushes me softly back towards the changing area and I go.

These clothes I treat far more carefully than my own. Taking the time to place them back on the hangers, before grabbing the next set which is the crochet shirt and black linen slacks. The slacks sit low on my hips and the shirt barely falls long enough to overlap at the hem. If I raised my arms, I'd show skin. It feels a little daring. I'm hesitant before stepping out to show Hannibal.

"This is a bit much for me." I say right away, I try to pull the shirt down to provide more coverage.

"In what way?" He's studying the clothes more than looking at me.

I look around quickly to see if the attendants are around. It's just us in the room so I just raise my arms a bit to show him. My hip bones and lower stomach flashing for a moment. I get an absurd desire to feel his hands slip up and under this shirt, in this outfit. *Stop, please.* This burgeoning crush is getting ridiculous.

His eyes slowly pull away from my midriff, and I can't help but feel hopeful that I am reading the reluctance right. "Perhaps not for a stroll around a botanical garden." He says with a slow smirk playing across his face. "Try on the shorts."

"I'm not wearing the shorts." I cross my arms and even just that motion hikes the soft fabric up a bit. I pull it down again.

“Humor me. Please. I would like to see you in them, even if you decide you indeed don’t like them.” He leans back in his chair, and I know, I am going to put on the damn shorts because I want to please him. For fuck’s sake what's happening to me?

He sips his water as I deliberate, which makes me realize my coffee is here.

I grab it and down it, careful not to drip any on the expensive clothes. The warmth of the liquid runs through me. I’m so weak. He probably just wants to tease me or something. He’s watching me expectantly; confident I am going to do as he says. He’s such a prick.

“Fine.” I go back in and take off the black pants. The shorts are a rich brick brown color. Almost the color of wet clay and they sit as high waisted as the first pants and fit just as well. Maybe I like high waisted pants... I like that they don’t put pressure on my hip bones. I can even tell even without a belt; they would be far more comfortable to wear all day.

“Hannibal?” I call out. The shirt sits oddly over these shorts. I look like a child. “Shirt tucked in or out?”

“Most certainly tucked in.”

So, I attempt to tuck it in and pull it on gently like he did the other shirt, hopefully making it fall right. It sits wide and open at the collar, closing off just above my sternum. I feel a bit self-conscious at how bare my chest feels. No hair or anything to even give the illusion of coverage.

With the shirt tucked in, though I have to admit, I don’t hate the shorts as much as I thought I would. They don’t fall as short as I expected them to. They hit just below mid-thigh even though they are cuffed. This much of me exposed though feels odd. I turn to the side and marvel a little and just how narrow this outfit makes me look.

“Will?”

Oh right, I am supposed to show him. I break off from staring at myself and step out. Head lowered. I don’t want to see him amused. I feel weirdly vulnerable and surprised at how much I actually like them.

I’m dreading his comments because part of me actually wants to wear this tomorrow, but if he teases me at all I can’t go through with it. I’m not even sure I can either way. I can hear my dad in my head, “Son, I know it ain’t fair but think of your safety first. Are cute clothes really worth the attention you’ll attract?”

There's a tiny little thought countering it though. It’s the echo of Hannibal holding me in the water. *‘I’ll keep you safe.’*

I know I’m shifting awkwardly, just standing here at war in my head and awaiting judgment. It would be stupid to wear something like this just because I feel... pretty... god, that word is even hard to think.

I don’t even notice that he's gotten up again until he’s fixing my shirt once more. Just a few delicate adjustments. I guess I did a better job this time.

“You like it don’t you?” There’s no smugness in his voice which surprises me, enough to risk looking at his face to find no amusement or judgment there either. Just something like approval.

It makes my cheeks burn. Or maybe it’s the fact I am going to admit it and *wear* them tomorrow that's making me flushed and hot.

He just waits patiently for me to say it.

“Yeah. Yeah, I kind of do.”

“You do look lovely.” He looks at me through the mirror and I internally preen at the paise.

-

By the time I come out, dressed in my boring heavy, now very, very not right feeling clothes, I find the dressing room empty.

Hannibal had asked me to pass the clothes I wanted to purchase to him so he could make arrangements at the counter. So, I did, *assuming* he’d just get them to have them bagged and ready for me to pay.

Instead, I walk out to find him standing by the front door, bags in hand ready to leave.

“Thank you for shopping with us.” The attendants say in eerie unison. Coy smiles on both their faces.

He didn’t.

But when I look too long at the register and back at the workers, the man winks at me and subtly nods Hannibal’s way.

Oh god, he *paid?*

I rush over to him. Grabbing him by the elbow and pulling him out of the store.

“How much was that? You could have just waited.” I say in a rushed hushed voice.

“There was no need to wait.” He shifts his arm so it’s less that I’m grabbing him and more he’s leading me down the avenue while I hold onto his arm. This sneaky fucker. He’s looking around like this is the most natural thing in the world. “I know of a shoe store you might enjoy. Very comfortable handmade shoes.”

Is he serious? “I’m not going anywhere ‘til you tell me how much that was so I can pay you back.”

He turns to me at that. “I don’t want you to pay me back. It is a gift, Will.”

Huh? “I don’t need you to buy me clothes, Hannibal.” I’m so confused, and I am starting to sound and feel angry.

“I know you don’t, but I wish to. This was my idea, and I am enjoying myself greatly and so are you.” He’s standing tall, looking at me with an infuriatingly raised eyebrow basically saying, ‘Tell me you’re not, I dare you.’

And fuck him, he’s right. “Sure, but... I should...” My protests are falling flat. It doesn’t feel right. I know I shouldn’t. It feels like I am taking advantage. So, I just tell him that outright.

“Will.” he says with seemingly great patience, but his eyes are kind with a glint to them I can’t actually place. “Listen to me,” and I am, “I want to buy you these clothes and you want to let me. I can see it. Let yourself have what you want for once.” For a moment, it feels like he’s talking about more than just the clothes.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone. This one is a bit longer than the rest but I hope you enjoyed it!
There's also a few things I want to add here.
1- Like Will, I don't know jack shit about tarot readings. So all the info I got about the meanings are from these to sights. I tried to strike a balance between making it fit my purposes for this story and staying as true as I could to the original meanings without it being straight up taking the text from the sight cuz that's not chill either. Please any of you who know more about this, I am open to feedback if there's a way I could handle this better. Full credit to these two sights for the content about the tarot cards themselves.
- https://www.dailytarotdraw.com/tarot-cards-list
- https://labyrinthos.co/blogs/tarot-card-meanings-list
2- I came across this shirt on Pinterest and I just had to use it in the story. I found it to be so exactly what this Will would find appealing at this point in the story, but it's a weird ass shirt. I'm really not sure if I do it justice when describing it so I want to add a link here as well. Just in case anyone is interested in what it actually looks like.
- https://www.pinterest.pt/pin/611434086937016035/
3- Lastly, I want to thank everyone for reading, especially those who share their thoughts. I really truly do love reading about what you think! It's such great encouragement and even if you have a critique, I'm happy to hear it! I appreciate you guys a bunch <3

Hannibal

Hannibal

Hannibal opened the door for their appointment at exactly seven-thirty. Will was sitting there in the waiting room as usual. What was not usual, was the energy about him. He got up immediately, like he was sitting on the edge of his seat, ready, needing, to get into Hannibal's office as soon as feasibly possible.

Will grabbed his bag, which Hannibal noted had a gift in the front pocket, and blows past him. It was a little rude, but Hannibal forgave him since it was just more evidence of how quickly Will has come to rely on their conversations. Hannibal smiles to himself as he shuts the door.

Will tosses his bag onto the chaise.

"Has Christmas come early?" Hannibal said, turning to watch Will pause in yanking off his jacket, "Or late?" He points at Will's bag, indicating the gift.

"It was for Abigail." Will's tone was solemn, a little at odds with the teaming aggression in his movements just before.

"Was?" Hannibal stood by the door, giving Will some space, but his tone was curious.

Will finished removing his jacket and tossed it alongside his discarded bag and gift. "Thought better of it. Wasn't thinking straight. I was... I was upset when I bought it." rubbed at his face as he paced. "Maybe still am." Which was certainly clear. He was radiating anger and agitation. There was even a bit of a tremor to his voice on the 'maybe'.

Hannibal watched, admiring how much straighter Will stood when coursing with such feelings. He moved with the strength he hides so, much more obvious to the world now. Curiosity brought Hannibal to Will's bag, checking the gift. Pretty cream paper tied with cream and champagne ribbons for a bow. It's delicate and simple. It would have suited Abigail. He didn't try to hide his inspection of the neatly wrapped gift. They were at a point of comfort with each other that they could commit such little breaches of personal space without protest "What is it?" He asks.

"Magnifying glass. Fly tying gear." Will supplied while fiddling with one of Hannibal's drawing pencils from his desk.

Hannibal watched Will and sat in his chair. The chairs were still far apart from each other. Directly facing each other. He would move them as time went on. But for now, it made little difference. In most sessions, Will moved too much to make use of the chairs anyway. "Teaching her how to fish? Her father taught her how to hunt."

"That's why I thought better of it," Will said with a deep sigh. He so desperately wanted to reach out to the girl, but his similarities to her father, and her father living on in his head,

were causing him distressing blockades. Their attachment was not without their difficulties, but still growing at a pleasing pace.

Will returned the pencil and gently ran his finger along the sharp edge of the scalpel that lay next to it. “Feeling paternal, Will?” Hannibal asked as he let himself take the opportunity to admire Will’s body while the omega had his back to him.

Will turned sharply to him, ever defensive and challenging, especially when filled with all that anger simmering inside him. “Aren’t you?” It was beautiful. He was beautiful.

“Yes,” Hannibal answered seriously.

Will just nodded, it was slow and oddly jerky.

“Our good friend, Dr. Bloom, has advised against taking too personal an interest in Abigail’s welfare.” Will walked away from that statement. Not wanting to argue, but clearly rejecting the whole notion. “Tell me, why are you angry?”

“I’m angry about those boys. I’m angry because I know when I find them, I can’t help them.” His words all started to rush together as he gesticulated sharply. “I can’t- I can't give them back what they just gave away.” His tone rose, the anger properly coming out, but he kept his back to Hannibal.

“A family.” Hannibal supplied the core issue here—the sore point for Will. Family was important to Will. He never had much of one, just him and his father from what Hannibal had managed to learn. But they were close. Family is fundamental to him. He was truly shaken by the idea of someone throwing away a loving family.

Will rubbed at his mouth. “Yeah... We call them the lost boys.”

“Abigail is lost too... and perhaps it's our responsibility, yours and mine, to help her find her way.” They will have a lovely family.

Will

Will

I’m so weak. I just tucked my head and said ok.

Hannibal leads me down a few more blocks to the shoe store and as we walk I can’t believe what I just agreed to. I am going to not only not pay him back for the clothes, but also let him buy me shoes to go with them. I don’t know what I’m doing.

I feel like my head is swimming. The only thing propelling me forward at this point is Hannibal's hand at the small of my back and his voice, talking on about the importance of hand-crafted shoes.

“-You will most certainly feel the difference.” He looks to his side at me. He looks earnest and now that what's going on here is all laid out, I realize he’s eager to share this with me.

A little bit of the puzzle clicks into place and I can feel my shoulders relax a fraction and I can finally join in.

“Yeah? What makes it so different from high quality factory production shoes? Those are still pretty good right?” I know that will get him really going. He scowls slightly right on queue.

“Even the most high quality factory made shoes are not made with adaptability in mind. There’s a certain level of flexibility, mouldability lost when not handcrafted.” I listen on, this sense of immense fondness filling me as I listen.

He wants to share his hobby with me. The simple, touchingly sweet fact of that wipes away most of my reservations about the money. To him, it *is* simple. Fashion is obviously very important to him, but he knows his version of it is out of my budget, but I would enjoy it, so he pays because he can. Because he wants me to share this with him.

I watch his face as he talks, “Those shoes are made to fit everyone relatively well. Handcrafted shoes are made to fit *you* well.” He finishes clearly satisfied with his explanation.

My heart clenches painfully. I’m so fucked.

-

In the store, Hannibal is so much more hands on. Hands on with the shopping, hands on *me* . I’m a little overwhelmed by just how much he’s always there. It's nothing big. And absolutely nothing even verging on sexual.

Guiding touches as he leads me around the sections.

Touches on my arm or hand to pull my attention to a particular pair of shoes he wants me to consider.

His fingers ghosting over mine as he takes shoes that I pass to him.

When I finally settle two pairs to try on, he calls over to the shop clerk who has been discreetly watching us the whole time.

“Please bring these in a size 10?” He asks and the man disappears into a back room. I don’t even question how Hannibal knows my shoe size.

I sit on the suede sofa tucked under the shop’s bay window and start removing my shoes. I am horrified to realize that not only are my socks darned, but also mismatched. Not even close in color, no, one glaring white and the other a dark grey. Why didn’t I pay attention to my socks today? Of all days? Oh yeah because I never do, unless it's to fix a hole.

They normally don't matter, I'm always in some kind of boot anyway. But here, in this store, with these shoes, I’m about to try on and with Hannibal watching, I’m deeply embarrassed.

Hannibal eyes me, and as his gaze travels down to my feet, which I’ve tucked as far under the sofa as I can, his mouth twitches. I want to crawl into a hole and die.

He checks the side table and in a little latch lid box pulls out two strange looking socks and hands them to me without a word.

I pull off my socks quickly before the attendant can come back out and shove them under my thigh, so they are out of sight.

The black socks fit oddly, they’re those no-show kind.

“Thanks.” I mumble out to him.

“You’ll need those kinds for the loafers you picked.” he states simply while standing at my side.

I’m looking up at him, about to say something to excuse the socks, when the man comes out with two boxes of shoes and sets them on the sofa next to me.

He opens each box and pulls out the structure supports for each of the shoes. When he’s done two pairs of leather handmade shoes are lined up by my feet.

All this is done in awkward, for me, silence. Both he and Hannibal seem totally at ease.

I watch the man in horror as he crouches like he’s going to put the shoe on *for me.* Hannibal makes some gesture that's high-class polite code for ‘don't bother, you’re dismissed.’. After which the man promptly gets up and leaves.

I am both relieved and kind of weirded out. But before I can reach down for the first shoe, Hannibal descends from his full height next to me, gets down on one knee, and picks up the shoe I was going for.

I know my face is screaming with shock and confusion and Hannibal can see it because he's staring me dead in the eyes, amusement clear behind his stoic mask as he grabs my ankle and slips the shoe on my foot.

My eyes are fixed on the knee braced on the admittedly spotless hardwood floor and I realize what this must look like. All the sly looks from staff at both stores, oh god they think we are a couple. That I'm some kind of really scruffy, but soon to be kept omega partner.

Hannibal places the second shoe on my other foot and asks, "Are they comfortable?" Like all this is totally normal. His hand still encircling my left ankle.

I am suddenly too hot. Flustered doesn't even come close to describing it. My chest feels tight. I can feel the start of the stress shivers race up my back. What is he *doing?*

"Will?" His voice helps me refocus. I meet his eyes and they are full of mischief. This complete and utter asshole. He's teasing me.

My eyes narrow at him, the surprised and embarrassed anger helps me push back the stupid panic from not understanding what was happening.

"They feel great." I say, all the frustration showing clearly in my voice, and his mouth spreads into a slow wide smile. He's such a smug bastard.

He gets up and stretches a hand out to me. "Come, look in the mirror."

I'm glaring at him while I get up, not grabbing his offered hand. Not sure how it's possible but he looks even more smug at my snub. My resolve takes a bit of a hit at the glisten in his eyes as they crease at the corners.

We walk over to the full length mirror. Admittedly these shoes are extremely comfortable. I glance down at them. Nothing feels tight or restrictive, but they don't feel like they are going to fall off at all. Huh.

He stands behind me as I look in the mirror. His eyes are still sparkling with mirth while I look like I'm thinking about snapping his neck. He's so clearly enjoying himself, that I have to fight back the smile to remain seeming annoyed at him.

His hands go to my shoulders, fingers massaging with soft pressure, and despite myself, I loosen up a bit.

"What do you think?" His voice is low and so close to my ear, that it sends a zing down my spine.

"They look terrible with these pants." I am really fighting now to play mad at him. He knows it too.

"You aren't going to be wearing them with these pants." His thumbs dig into knots at the base of my neck and my eyes flutter closed. "Imagine wearing them tomorrow, with your new clothes." I shiver, I know he can feel it, he lets out a little huff of a laugh. Just a singular

exhaust through his nose. His breath across the side of my face instantly reminds me of Noble and how he did almost the same thing not twenty-four hours ago.

“Wondering around peacefully at the botanical garden, with me.” He’s turned his head so he’s talking quietly into my ear now.

This feels so different though. His hot breath does more to wash away the gross feeling that's clung to me ever since the elevator, than the hours under warm water.

I do as he says, I’m powerless to do anything else.

I imagine how the cream of the shirt and the rich brown of those stupid shorts I want so desperately to wear would contrast nicely to all the vibrant greens around us.

How the shoes feel like wearing nothing and the color matches almost perfectly to the shorts themselves. I wonder what he will wear. Something perfect of course.

“What do you think of them now?” He asks again.

“They are perfect.” and I’ve forgotten all about trying to be mad at him.

“Indeed, they are.” I open my eyes to find him staring at me in the mirror. “You will have them then.” He looks so pleased.

I can feel how thick the air is between our bodies, we aren't touching anywhere except his hands on my shoulders. It feels heavy and I find myself about to relax into him. I want to lean back against his chest, but I don’t. That’s too much.

Whatever barrier that came down between us isn't that one. This isn't actually what the clerk thinks. The little show he’s putting on to mess with me isn't true. We aren’t a couple, and I don’t get to take that kind of comfort from him.

The fact that I’m sad about that makes me need to pull away from him. The comfortable little moment broken in by reality and how misplaced these feelings I’m having are. Fuck.

I can’t meet his eyes through the mirror anymore, so I go back to the sofa, leaving him to watch me. I sit down with a sigh and take off what are surely very expensive shoes.

I’m careful not to look at the bottoms in case they say the price. I doubt it's that kind of place, but I can't risk it. I can't let him pay if I know how much these are. I shouldn't let him pay, but before I even start getting my own shoes on the pair are whisked away from me, back into their box and Hannibal moves over to the counter. The second pair of shoes left on the floor, long forgotten.

I can’t watch. My heart is pounding with a mix of excitement and shame. Excitement because Hannibal is right, I do like that he wants to buy me things, I want him to. I so desperately want his attention and approval, it's upsetting. But I'm full of shame because I don't think he knows why I want it or just how much. How much more I’m slowly realizing I want from him. It feels like I'm taking something that isn't mine. Taking more than I’m allotted.

I rejoin him once he's done and we leave the store together, I can't look at him, but I grab his sleeve gently, to get his attention, but mainly because I feel adrift and lost and I need anchoring.

"Thank you, Hannibal." I sound almost meek, but I'm a bit too dissociated to focus enough to alter it.

"You are very welcome. It's my pleasure." He doesn't gloat, or even bring up that he got to me in the store at all.

We walk in silence for a while. He, in his usual comfortable self-assurance, while I'm stuck in gloomy contemplation until eventually, after a couple blocks of walking, he asks, "What's occupying your mind so fiercely that you're frowning?"

I think of lying, or at least evading the question. But I need to talk about this. I need to process what's going on, and he's the person I do that with. How do I process what I'm feeling about him without telling him? I can't, I know that. He'd figure it out. He might already know. That makes me frown harder.

He pauses us both, to watch me properly. I can feel him taking in all that must be flickering over my face.

So, I opt for a half measure. Something honest, but not the main issue. "All the staff in those stores think I'm some unkempt sugar baby or something." The idea has me fighting to keep a blush from rising on my face.

Hannibal laughs softly, "I am sure that might be the impression we left them with."

"You mean *you* left them with? Why did you do that?" I'm looking back at him now. I want to see his answer, even though he's usually so inscrutable. I watch for the little tells I've learned to read in him.

"They would have thought that regardless, why not take some amusement from it ourselves?" I marvel at him. The world is so simple for him, isn't it?

"That doesn't bother you? That they just assume?" I think of my own reaction to the deception game he played. My own anger at being part of painting a false picture.

"No, why should it?"

"I don't know, because it's not true." I say with confused frustration. How is this all just so easy for him?

He looks off down the street as he answers. "Most people don't walk away from small encounters like those with truthful impressions of each other. We can live on in their minds as such with no bearing on our lives, or the truth of our actual dynamic."

"What is our dynamic?" I blurt out then kick myself immediately. I don't want to have my half of that particular conversation right now. I hold myself still and tense, waiting for the repercussions of not knowing when to just shut the fuck up.

Hannibal just smiles down at me, maybe reading my chagrin correctly and politely sidestepping that conversation, or maybe just being a cryptic fucker when he says, “Whatever we decide it to be.”

-

I am lying in bed restless and buzzing with this prickling energy all over my skin. It’s almost eleven at night according to the horrible digital clock on my side table.

I keep forgetting to replace it. I hate the glaring red light from the numbers. I turn over, onto my side and my eyes fall onto the shopping bags. Just two thick card bags with a stupid amount of tissue paper inside, sitting on my floor by the side table.

I need to sleep. I didn’t do anything other than shop with Hannibal today, but I’m exhausted. That whole ordeal drained and exhilarated me. I still don’t really know how to process everything that happened.

Doesn’t help that I’ve been aggressively avoiding thinking about the big fat crush I’ve somehow fallen into. Even though it’s been in my peripheral thoughts all day, just the same.

Now, with nothing acting as a distraction, I can’t *not* think about it. I stare at the bags. If I’m honest, I’m terrified. I am terrified of messing up, of these feelings ruining the friendship. I’ve never had a friend like Hannibal. It’s been a few years now, but it’s always changing, we are always getting closer. He’s too important.

I’ve never felt this...safe... with anyone. How sad is that? I’ve been married and still.

I sigh deeply. Jack wasn’t a bad man. He was a pragmatic man. We had an arrangement. He didn’t mistreat me, whatever the fucking Chesapeake Ripper thinks. God, how fucked is my life that I’m getting white-knighted by a serial killer?

I concede a bit, I didn’t ever really feel safe with Jack though. Not like I do with Hannibal, but that isn’t Jack’s fault. I didn’t marry him for safety, the exact opposite actually.

I kick the sheets off myself. It’s too stuffy in here, but I don’t want to get up to open a window. It's not enough, so I pull off my shirt too. A hand runs up my chest, without really thinking about it.

I can’t help the creeping feeling of guilt for developing these feelings for Hannibal so soon after Jack’s death. It’s only just been two months...

I turn over again, facing away from the bags. Rubbing at my eyes until I see white flashes behind my lids. This is ridiculous.

Hannibal’s hand on my ankle, just like earlier in the day, the feeling of his long fingers wraps around me again. The feeling is as real as it was, but he isn’t here now. I rub my ankle against my other foot trying to dispel the sensation. It just comes back, but now it travels up my leg slowly.

The prickling on my skin sinks deeper into me, as I imagine him stroking up my leg in the store. I feel shameless, but I can't stop how my body reacts.

An ache is pooling low in my core. I throw an arm over my eyes. This is so stupid.

Maybe this is just because of the suppressant withdrawal. So far it hasn't felt like anything, but maybe it's a psychological symptom?

That's got to be it because the alternative doesn't make any sense. I've never been this person. The type to get infatuated with someone.

I clutch onto my long pillow, my leg draping over it as I bury my face into the softness of the cotton pillowcase. The feeling of it against my half hard dick has me groaning, muffled into the pillow.

It doesn't take more than that light contact to get me fully hard and my head floods with images of Hannibal standing behind me, murmuring into my ear. Hannibal standing tall and proud and very naked, wading into the water. Hannibal's hand on my ankles and the phantom feeling travels all the way up. Up my leg, over my hips, ribs back. Like he is lying here with me. Like I am not just clutching onto a pillow but onto him.

I try to ignore the feeling. Try to ignore how instinctively, my hips are rolling even though I don't want to. I know I shouldn't. I have to face him tomorrow. This isn't like the shower, my brain accidentally filling with images of him while I was already masturbating.

This would be me thinking about him and *then* masturbating. Pretending he's here. This is so wrong. But that idea just makes me harder.

I remember the way he felt under my hands while we played. The pretense of the water fight allowed me to touch far more of him, naked him, than I even thought possible.

My hand slides up the pillow as if it were his chest. My overly active imagination, able to swap out the feeling relatively well, from the plush give of the pillow to the firm muscles overlayed in just enough softness that makes me want to dig my fingers in.

My fingers running through his well trimmed chest hair, up over his collarbones, and over his throat. I imagine he'd tip his head back, his eyes with that crinkled pleased look he's directing at me more and more lately, but also an added undercurrent of dark hunger that makes me exhale a soft moan.

I'm grinding in earnest now, with the sting of shame on my face, but it's not stopping me. I know it won't. I'm too far gone at this point. I feel desperate and utterly pathetically needy. Knowing that it won't happen just makes it worse. So, I live it in this fantasy.

I imagine it's his hand and not mine that slides over my stomach. Slowly and teasingly moving south. He's turning into such an obnoxious playful shit, that I bet he's a horrible tease in bed too. So, I don't let my hand go where I want. Instead, I redirect over my inner thigh, letting my blunt nails drag across the sensitive skin there.

I can feel how wet I’m getting, the ache growing to an insistent need, fueling the desperate search for friction. I want to slide my fingers into myself, get some relief from the need to be fucked senseless. It's been too long, but something about that feels like too much. A line I can’t come back from.

Instead, I just let myself imagine It’s Hannibal's hand that wraps around my dick. I’m too impatient to follow through with the teasing, instead opting for languid strokes that have me spilling over far too soon.

I flip onto my back, trying to come down and calm my breathing. The usual dissipation of arousal doesn’t come. There’s no cessation despite feeling a wave of sleepiness come over me.

The ache doesn’t leave and neither does the gnawing need. Frustrated, I fling myself over and re-bury myself in my collection of pillows and blankets. Needing the heavy and crowded in feeling of being surrounded. It almost mimics being held.

-

I slam the car door shut after me. I’m pissed at myself for not thinking about fueling up the car on my way home yesterday. Now I’m out in the local small town gas station in this ridiculous outfit.

I slept so restlessly last night, and I’m still fucking horny. I jacked off again in the shower and nothing. It’s soured my mood totally. I’m so on edge, feeling this much of my skin exposed to the open air isn’t helping.

The air feels hot and humid as I wait for the tank to fill. The smell of gas in the air makes me want to sneeze just to clear it from my nose, but it won't help. What's worse is the lingering leering looks I’m getting from the three men hanging out by the rack of gas bottles. Probably alphas by their posturing.

I try to hide behind my truck as much as I can, but I know I’m going to have to walk past them to pay and I’m dreading it.

They are all watching, throwing comments at each other. Working each other up. At least one of them will say something to me as I pass.

I let the last few drips fall into my tank, replace the hose onto the stand, and take a deep breath. I tug at the shorts trying to make them cover more. They really aren't even that skimpy, most of my thighs are covered, but the way they sinch in at my waist reads distinctly *omega* . I flush just at the idea.

There's nothing for it then. I close the lid of the gas tank and walk over. Fast paced, head up, eyes strictly forward, firmly not making eye contact, even though I feel them watching.

Just as I get to the curb is when one of them says, “Smile, sweetheart.”

Seriously? *Smile?* That's what all their collective efforts could come up with? How unoriginal... I can't help the snort of laughter I have to swallow as I stride up to the store door.

The man who spoke sidesteps in front of me. Blocking the door. That's when I realize just how far up, I have to look to see his face from this close. Shit...

"You almost smiled, Find me funny huh? Go on then, give us a smile." He looms over me. The smell of him hits my stomach. Definitely an alpha.

I take two quick steps back, out of grabbing range, but his buddies got behind me. Fuck. I square up my shoulders. It's all posturing, but sometimes acting meek is more dangerous. "I was just admiring your creativity." I sneer at him, distinctly pretending I don't care about the men flanking behind me. "Now if you'd excuse me." I try to step around him to the door.

He grabs my arm, just above my elbow. His hot damp hand on my skin feels vile.

Before I can do anything, a banging sound comes from the shop window, followed by a young feminine voice, "Leave him alone Harold! Daddy's told you to behave."

Harold, apparently, leans back so his head pops into the store. "Aw we are just talking to the pretty thing, Betty, no harm meant," *he's got a big, charming smile on his face, and if he weren't such a pig, he'd actually be really handsome. I can see how he wins many people over with that smile. To my own horror, I feel the nagging arousal take interest too. "Right, sweetheart?" he says to me, but he doesn't let go of my arm, instead slides his grip down to my wrist.

"Right." I say with as much venom in my voice as I can manage and shake him off, pushing past him into the store. What's wrong with me? I look back at him, just to confirm that I've totally lost my mind. But no, he's still handsome. He winks at me and heavy dark eyes rake over my body which both makes me feel hot and disgusted at the same time. What the fuck?

I rip my eyes away from him.

The girl at the register looks barely more than 17. She gives me a big sheepish smile. "Sorry about them. Harold's a good man, really. Just a bit of a flirt around pretty omegas." I am torn between admiration of how this very young omega girl manages to handle the brutes out there but sadden by just how much she clearly buys into society's bullshit at the same time. "What can I do for ya?"

"Uh, Just the gas, please. Stand 4." I watch as she rings me up then checks out the window and frowns. I look too, but see nothing. She finishes and hands me the receipt.

"Wait a moment please." She says then hits some kind of intercom button and her voice rings out in the store and across the pumps outside. "Larry, get away from his truck for fuck's sake." I look outside and watch in mild horror as I see one of 'good guy, Harold's' buddies slink off from behind my car.

“I’ll walk you to your truck so they don’t bother you.” She ducks under the counter flap instead of lifting it up. She’s tiny. “We don’t have any boy omegas around here, you’ve got them all riled up, I guess.” She looks over me curiously, then smiles up at me. She’s got a cute smile. I don’t want her near those alphas. Is she working alone here?

“No, It’s ok, really. I don’t want them to bother you. I’ll be fine.” gesture like I’m going to touch her shoulder to stop her, but don’t quite make contact. Looking around to see if I can spot any other staff around. Nothing.

She laughs a little, “Oh don’t worry about me, my daddy’s the sheriff, they won’t bother me. Daddy’s already put the fear of God and himself in them about that.” And that makes my stomach sink. She’s only a child... But she steps out without an ounce of fear in the bounce in her step.

I follow after her quietly, watchful, but the men seem to have left. Bored now that their little game has been spoiled.

We get to my car and she turns to me. Her moss green eyes on me. “I’m really sorry about them, I hope you come back. Are you just passing through?”

I never expect people to remember me, I specifically move around in a way so people won't, but the fact that this is the gas station I come to most often since the move and only now that I ‘look my gender’ so to speak, I’m getting noticed sits oddly with me.

“No, I live in the area.”

Her eyes light up. “Oh, a new neighbor then, that's so nice. My older sister Maggie is gonna be so excited. She’s about your age. It’s always nice to have more omegas around, you know?” She’s fumbling around in her apron pocket and pulls out a notepad and felt pen, scratching away at the paper. “There aren’t many of us in town, especially younger omegas. We are a little outnumbered.” she’s talking a mile a minute, no doubt in reaction to my taken-aback expression.

She hands me the little torn off paper, “In case you wanna call. I mean it, Maggie would love it. Welcome to Wolftrap.” I notice a bit of color rise in her cheeks before she bounds off back to the store.

I look at the little paper with her older sister’s number on it. Stunned a little by the kindness and easy friendliness she showed. It was...nice.

I get in my truck and drive off, the paper tucked into my shorts’ pocket.

-

We are almost at the Rawlings Conservatory and I’m starting to feel nervous. I tug at my shorts and shift the shirt around, so it doesn’t fall so open. I don’t want any repeat incidents like at the gas station. The idea of being back out in public dressed like this... I sigh.

It felt fine in Hannibal's home. In fact, the way he looked me over and told me I looked perfect actually had me feeling pretty good about it. We ate and we talked and I didn't feel uncomfortable or out of place. What was the best though was that he didn't treat me any differently.

But now as I see the beautiful glass conservatory coming into view and the cars filling about a quarter of the parking lot, the reality of people being here pops that safe bubble I had found in his company.

"Are you anxious?" Hannibal looks over at me, at my fussing, with a raised eyebrow. He turns the Bentley into the parking lot.

"Sort of. I didn't fully factor in that there are going to be people around." I scowl out the window. I don't actually see anyone, though.

He chuckles at me, the dick. "There usually are, but it appears to be a rather quiet day. I doubt we will run into many people as we explore."

"Yeah, I guess." I sink into the seat, almost like I'm trying not to be visible through the window.

"What is the worst that could happen if we encounter people today? What scenarios are your anxieties conjuring?" He finds a spot in the middle of an empty row of spaces. Then he turns to me, giving me his full attention. It feels like our old sessions.

"Well, I don't feel like getting harassed again today." I know my tone is slightly petulant, as I keep gazing out the window, but I am still thrown way off by my irrational reaction to *Harold* . I'm grossed out that even for a second, I considered it.

"Will." Hannibal's voice is low and dark, it makes me look at him. Nothing in his usual placid expression changed, but everything is different somehow. My breath catches in my throat. "You were harassed?"

It's not a question. It's not even a request for more information.

It's a demand. That's a 'tell me, now'.

Part of me is marveling at how he does that. Ooze out menace without changing anything about himself. It's quite enthralling.

Part of me is swooning like a moron at the protective edge in his tone.

I can't really do anything but obey that tone, "I had to get gas before coming to meet you. There were some men, alphas." I watch as his hand clenches ever so slightly around the steering wheel. I try to downplay it. "It was nothing, they just made a comment. They back down to the kid at the register. It really wasn't anything major." It really wasn't even that big of a deal.

"You were not alone then?"

“No, the girl behind the counter butted in.” I don’t really know why I don’t want to tell him just what happened.

“The interaction had to be bad enough for a bystander to interfere. What happened, Will?” Again, not a request. Why is this making me so nervous?

“Hannibal, really, it was nothing. Some dicks just told me to smile. I mouthed off, they got in my face. She told him to back off. They did.” That isn't really what happened though, is it? Why am I editing?

His eyes are boring into me. I distinctly get the impression he knows.

“Did they touch you?” He’s examining me now, looking over me to spot anything, there’s enough bare skin on me to feel strangely naked under his intense gaze.

“No!” They did though. “Well, he just grabbed my arm.” I reach out to touch him. My hand resting on his forearm of his hands that is still gripping the steering wheel. The moment I touch him I can feel just how tense his muscles are, how hard his grip is on the wheel.

He’s so mad. Not mad at me, but *for* me. Oh god, I’m so turned on.

He relaxes at my touch. Visibly readjusting. It's strange to watch him shift. Odder still to realize he slipped a bit. His ever-present control needs to be readjusted and I caused it. “Did he hurt you?” He says with his new won control.

My heart is pounding, and I am all flushed. I’m too hot. “No, I’m not hurt.”

He puts his other hand over mine on his arm. His eyes are clear and warm. “I am glad. I am sorry you experienced that. If you find yourself in other encounters like that, please, call me.” He pats my hand. “You won't have to worry about that while you’re out with me.” He smiles at me, and my stomach erupts in butterflies.

All I can do is nod at him. His warm eyes fill me up, pull me in. But when he suddenly takes in a deep breath I panic, knowing exactly what he’s going to be able to smell on me in this closed space. I need to get out of this car. I pivot in my seat and scramble for the handle, launching myself outside.

This isn’t happening. I need to get a fucking grip.

I hear his door open as I take great gulps of the fresh air. It’s warm, but there's a wetness that holds a bit of cool in the breeze that’s calming my overheated skin. “Will?” He says as he shuts his door. “Are you alright?” He knows I’m not.

His footsteps travel to me, but I can’t turn around to look at him. I close my eyes and try to calm my breathing a bit. I look out to the sky. The clouds are moving fast, racing across the sky like my thoughts.

His hand rests lightly on my shoulder as his hushed voice comes from behind me. “No need to be embarrassed. You’ve started to feel the effects of the withdrawal. It's going to cause unexpected reactions and you had a stressful morning.” He pauses for a moment, maybe

waiting for me to say something, which I don't, maybe just thinking. “Do you wish to go home?”

That has me turning around. “No.” I look over to the conservatory and all the lush green surrounding it, standing out starkly against the white and grey roiling clouds. “No, I’m sorry. This is just... strange. I’m ok now.”

“If you are certain.” He waits a beat for me to nod, when I do, he offers me his arm. I don’t have the heart to reject it. I don’t *want* to reject it. So, I grab onto him. I try not to be obvious in the way I can’t help but lean in ever so slightly and smell him. His rich earthy scent sends a shiver down my spine. He smells like forest, glacier water, and bergamot.

I’m a mess.

-

We walk like that, me on his arm almost the whole time. It starts out stilted and awkward because I’m stilted and awkward, and most of all deeply embarrassed. But in time and with his patience, the tension in me eases.

Eventually, he has me talking about the different plants. He mostly knows about the medicinal ones.

I mostly know about the ones that will kill a person. Or are safe to eat.

Despite the cars, we encounter remarkably few people and none of them pay me any attention. I try not to think too hard about why exactly that is... Regardless, I am able to relax in the gorgeous space around us.

It's truly beautiful, to the point we are both just quiet for long stretches of time. Just admiring. The walk between the main building and the greenhouse is really something. We pass through an area filled with a variety of trees. It's clear that many of these trees would never naturally occur near each other, but here they create a unique eclectic canopy above us.

I fall silent while looking up, letting Hannibal guide me. It’s thick enough to block out the sky for the most part. I know I’m not being the best company right now but it's just so beautiful. I want to drink it all in. The breeze runs through my clothes.

-

Hannibal was fucking right. When we enter the greenhouse, I am absolutely glad to be in shorts.

Stepping in here feels like walking into a viscous wet wall. I’m immediately damp and fanning myself. Even Hannibal gets a sheen to him, which just makes him look glowy. He’s kind of unreal.

But all around us are some of the most beautiful flowers and lush leaves I’ve ever seen in person and the way it smells is something else. Deep sweet floral scents sit heavy in the air, grounded by the nutrient rich soils.

I pause a few steps in, halting Hannibal in the process, and just close my eyes for a moment, breathing in deeply. Something about the heavy heat, complicated scents and quiet reminds me of Louisiana and a moment in my childhood.

In the bayou, our motor broke down. Dad teaching me how to fix it. I smile a bit.

“You look quite at peace here.” I open my eyes at Hannibal’s hushed voice. He’s watching me.

“It just brought back a memory.” I match his quiet tone. With me holding onto his arm we are close enough to hear even if we whispered.

“It appeared to be a pleasant memory. Would you care to share it?” His eyes are searching over my face. We aren’t that far apart. I can see the gold and burgundy flecks in his brown eyes.

“I was maybe 12. Dad and I were out test running a boat that needed repairs. Its motor totally died on us deep into the bayou. It was hot like this, and the soil smelled similar. Heavy, wet, and nourishing.” I watch a smile spread across his mouth. I’m smiling too. “Dad was showing me what was going wrong. He walked me through fixing it. That was the first boat motor I fixed. Had to be quick before the gators got too interested” I’m grinning now.

“He must have been very proud of you.” He’s close enough that I can feel the softest touch of his breath across my mouth.

I nod. “Dad was really my biggest cheerleader. My only one really.”

“He was a man with good sense then, where the rest of the world was blind.” I frown, not because what he said bothers me, the exact opposite actually. His kind words make my heart hurt a bit. It makes me wish he could have met my dad. He stands there, just looking at me, I almost get the sense he’s waiting.

I want to lean into him. My eyes flick down to his mouth and the corner twitches upwards. My breath catches in my throat.

Suddenly, a rushing sound cascades across the glass all around us. We both glance up and see water pouring down the clear ceiling and walls.

-

We’ve been stuck in the greenhouse for forty minutes already and there’s no sign of the rain easing up at all.

“I really should have checked the weather.” I pace over to a bench near the main entrance, charmingly placed under a fig tree. It's quite large but the branches hang low, creating a little cave-like space over the wooden seat. Its leaves are packed densely and there are hundreds of little buds scattered around, that will soon be figs.

“An oversight I made as well. I didn’t even think to put an umbrella in the car.” Hannibal paces leisurely in front of me. It’s not a big greenhouse, we circled it at least five times

already. I don't think anyone else could see it, but I can see the impatience in the way he's clasped his hands behind his back, his grip on his own wrist just a little tense. His footfall, just a little sharper than usual.

"It doesn't look like it's going to let up any time soon." I look up through the glass ceiling, through it and the deluge of water distorting the view, the sky is covered in thick racing clouds. There's no break in the grey cover even on the horizon.

"It explains why there are so few people here today." He's prowling around like a big cat, restless energy disguised by grace. I lean back, my arms stretching across the back of the bench on either side of me and watch him. I like that he doesn't mind. Not that he would have any ledge to stand with how much he watches me, but it's nice to not have to worry about looking too much with him.

He matched his clothes to mine. It makes me smile, just as it did when I first saw him today, holding the door open for me. It's not the same way Jack would have us matching. Not in a way that looks like a set, but subtly. A nod to one another.

He carefully removes his tan summer jacket. He must be boiling, but underneath his shirt sits on him mostly dry. The only part of his shirt that catches on his skin is along his spine, showing off the way his back shifts and moves as he walks. The needy ache that has sort of become background noise as the day has gone on spikes up in intensity. I cross my legs, trying to ignore it.

He goes to fold just jacket over his arm, but I reach out. "Give it."

He hands it off to me and I fold it neatly and place it on the bench next to me. I can feel the heat of his skin lingering in the fabric. My hand stays resting over it on the bench.

"Thank you. I may as well have chosen to wear shorts if I had planned to spend an hour in here." He says while fixing the tuck of his cream button down. It's the exact same shade as mine. The whole outfit is unusually simple for him.

"I would love to see you in shorts. I can't picture it." My brain goes to cargo shorts, and I only half try to stifle the laugh it causes.

He looks at me like I'm being ridiculous. "I have been to a beach." He sniffs.

"You'll have to take me, so I believe it." I raise an eyebrow playfully challenging him. Part of me knows he would take me if I asked seriously.

"Somehow, I don't see you as a beach sort of person." He's right, I'm not. The idea of laying around in the sun for hours doing nothing would drive me crazy. Then there's *sand* .

"Sand gets everywhere, it's a sensory nightmare," I say to concede his point. I'll have to think of a different way to see him in shorts.

The doors burst open and a young man and an elderly lady rush in.

“Awful weather, what a day to come here.” The lady says as she checks her perfectly curled pale grey hair. The young man with her shakes out their umbrella.

“Sorry Gran, I didn't think the storm would hit ‘til this evening.”

She waves him off and then spots me and Hannibal. “Looks like we aren’t the only ones foolish enough to get stuck in this storm.” She smiles at me, but her eyes rake over Hannibal in the most lecherous way, which is sort of funny since she’s possibly eighty.

“Good afternoon.” Hannibal says politely, not seeming affronted by it at all. In fact, he’s got his charming ‘for the people’ smile on and she’s eating it up.

I’m suddenly getting the impression this has just turned into a thing. I get up, something feels rude about me just lounging in the background, so I join his side.

“Good afternoon.” I say, far less charmingly. She eyes us both. The grandson seems to be used to his grandmother talking to random strangers because he’s got this sort of resolved look on his face as he stands just slightly behind her.

She takes two quick steps up to us, “My what a beautiful couple you are. Pity the rain is dampening your date.” She laughs at her own joke and Hannibal seems delighted by it too.

I stiffen at the assumption though. Before I can say something to correct her Hannibal slinks his hand around my waist and pulls me into him. I snap my head to look at him and he meets my eyes, his crowfeet flashing at me with that same mischief from the store. Somehow, I know he wants me to play along with him this time.

I don’t get what he’s doing, but I go along with it. It really doesn’t take much acting at all. My heart is pounding, but I let myself be pulled in and tucked against his side. I put my arm around his back to rest my hand on his shoulder.

His fingers drum a slow rhythm along my ribs, as he directs his attention back to the tall lady In front of us. “The rain caught us off guard as well. We were lucky enough to be in here already when it started to rain.” Each slow tap along my side sends jolts through me. It's hard to concentrate. The shirt lets so much of the heat from his hand through to my skin. We are both radiating so much heat from being in here so long, it’s overwhelming to be this close to him.

“You’ve been stuck in here this whole time? That was nearly an hour ago. Wasn’t it about an hour ago, Timothy?” She half turns to her grandson.

He glances at his phone. “Yes Gran, about that.” He sounds bored but satisfied enough to amuse his grandmother. She’s quite an imposing figure. Tall for a woman, even an alpha woman, which I don’t think she is. Maybe beta?

“You poor things, though I’m sure you found plenty to entrain yourselves in here all alone.” Her lipstick is nearly purple making her smirk like a stark slash across her face.

I’m turning bright red, but Hannibal chuckles while the young man groans, “Grandma, please.” He sounds pained, like she does this a lot.

“Please, what? I’m just teasing. Pretty young couple like them, what else would they be doing” She winks at me. “I’m sure you’re eager to get out of here. Use our umbrella.”

“No, ma’am please, It’s alright.” I protest, though I really don't want to be stuck here with her and these comments. I’m flustered and feel like I'm being called out on my inner thoughts. The idea of making out with Hannibal in this humid beautiful space brings those butterflies back.

He tips his head to lean against mine for a moment. I take comfort from his touch, the feel of his strong shoulder under my hand as I stroke my thumb across his shoulder blade.

“No, I insist. Take it, you can drive up and drop it off. Better than running all the way out to the cars with nothing. This storm isn’t going anywhere.” She nods like it's all decided.

I’m going to argue against it again, but Hannibal squeezes me, “A very gracious offer, don’t you think, honey?” My eyes grow wide at the pet name. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Yes, Thank you so much.” I feel myself saying.

She turns to her grandson, Timothy, takes his arm, “Go on then.” She dismisses us.

I turn and grab Hannibal’s jacket as he bends down to pick up the umbrella they left to drain by the door.

“Come,” he says to me, his free arm out for me. “Thank you again, ma’am, we will be back in a moment.”

She nods and they turn away to explore the greenhouse.

Hannibal pulls me back into his side so we both fit well under the dark umbrella.

It's really pouring outside as we step out; my feet are instantly wet. The door swings closed behind us.

“She’s a real steamroller.” I laugh, relieved to be out of there and also a little giddy from the bit of pretend we just played.

“Indeed, she seems the type of woman who is used to people listening to her every command.” He muses, a smile still on his face. He obviously found her amusing.

The umbrella really isn't doing much to help. The rain is coming in a little sideways, so he tips it, and we start to run for the car. He comes around to my side of the car and makes sure I’m in first before getting in himself. His casual chivalry warms me a bit. It feels so natural from him. Him being considerate, not old fashioned.

He gets into the car, and I take the dripping umbrella from him as soon as he’s in, so it doesn't drip all over him. His tan slacks are already soaked around the hems and covered in dark

drops across his thighs.

“Thank you.” He says as he buckles up and I place the dripping thing by my feet.

It's a short drive to come around to the greenhouse. He pulls the Bentley up to the curb and starts to unbuckle his belt.

“No, I’ll take it.” undo my seatbelt too, and grab the umbrella.

“Will, no. Please hand it to me.” I look over his nice suit that he picked to match me, and I just can’t let him get soaked. So, I hand him his jacket that was sitting across my lap, instead and get out of the car, opening the umbrella as I step out into the rain.

It’s maybe 20 yards across some grass to the greenhouse side entrance. Inside I find the elder lady and her Timothy, by the orchids.

“Excuse me. Thank you again for letting us use your umbrella.” I say as I walk up to them.

She scowls at me. “You came? Where’s that handsome alpha of yours? He shouldn’t let you run around in the rain.” Alpha of mine...

I laugh a bit. “Oh, he tried, I didn’t let him.”

“Ah,” her smile gets this odd mix of warm and wicked, “Good, you both know how lucky you are. Are you mated?”

That floors me. “What? No... We’re um... new?” I’m such a garbage liar. Especially when so taken off guard. Aren’t mated couples kind of hard to miss?

“Well then, you run off back to him.” Her smile is knowing in that way that older people can have.

“Um, Ok yeah, thanks. Have a good afternoon.” I say to them both then turn back to face the rain.

I sprint to the car, but it's no real use. The rain is coming down so heavily. It’s a wonderful mix of cool and warm. Summer rain is amazing. I’m laughing like a little kid by the time I manage to get back into the car.

Hannibal looks at me concerned, I am soaking from head to toe, but I’ve got a big goofy grin on that seems to rub off on him. He laughs a little at me. “I see you don't mind the rain.”

“Nah, It's warm today. Sorry about your seat though.” I look down around me. My hair falls in wet curls over my eyes, dripping into my lap. Luckily the upholstery is leather, and it won't soak in.

“The car will survive,” I look back up at him “as long as you aren’t too uncomfortable.” He reaches out and brushes my hair away from my face, tucking it behind my ear. “Your hair has gotten long.” The atmosphere in the car has gotten still, delicate. I feel like if I move or talk too loud I’ll miss something, but I can’t let myself think about what.

“I need a haircut.” I whisper, watching his face as he looks over mine.

“I like it long.” Is all he says for a bit. His hand lingers by my neck, the back of one finger gently resting over my pulse point. He smiles as he feels how fast my heart is beating.

I frown a bit, confused. This feels... like something. He watches my brows furrow and moves away, starts the car and we drive off.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!